

## Universal Parking Challenge Meets Technological Solution

Virginia Commonwealth University (“VCU”) is the most comprehensive urban university in the commonwealth and a top research university in the nation. VCU is located on two campuses that frame downtown Richmond combining rich history with innovation and excitement. The diverse enrollment of this public institution includes 25,001 students. Through the compilation of ten schools, one college, the VCU Health System, and the Inger and Walter Rice Center for Environmental Life Sciences, the university offers more than 130 undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs. VCU is a Carnegie I Research University, founded in 1838, and is noted as one of the three largest research doctoral institutions located in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Sixteen of the graduate and professional programs offered at VCU have been ranked among the best in the nation by *U.S News* and *World Report*. Being one of just 2.8% of the true research universities, VCU occupies a unique place in the global advancement of knowledge. From Semiconductor development to cancer treatment, VCU faculty members are pursuing investigational research that will have a broad impact on technology, medicine and the workplace itself.

In 1990, the arrival of VCU’s President Eugene Trani, in partnership with the public and private sectors, brought forward a visionary master plan for the university and its development. While serving on numerous corporate and civic boards within the community, Dr. Trani has also held scholarly positions within the United States and abroad. President Trani supported the computer initiative of 2001 that requires all students to own a computer. This new requirement enables the university to embark on a new technological corridor full of possibilities. All the while, President Trani remains committed to students with the desire to be involved with a leading, dynamic university.

As can be imagined, the administration of parking services at a large urban institution with 25,001 students can pose a challenge among any university. VCU’s Department of

Business Services, which manages several auxiliary services, took the initiative to design a modern application that allows students to purchase parking subscriptions utilizing the Internet. This website originated as a solution to enhance customer service; evolving from a survey where students voiced their desire for an alternative to waiting in long lines to purchase parking.

The timeline for this best practice includes approximately 8 months of research. The preparation began in October of 2000 with system analysis, conceptualizing, design and implementation. This project successfully went “live” on May 5, 2001. Quotes on the application development ranged from approximately \$3,500 to \$11,000. During the 8 months of developing the Parking Subscription Website, the Department of Business Services consulted with a number of other departments throughout the university:

- Parking and Transportation Services provided knowledgeable Customer Service Specialists who provided feedback on behalf of the initiative.
- Web Support Services aided in developing the application and providing system design input.
- Academic Information Technology assisted in the set-up, installation and maintenance of the Webserver, SQL server, and system software.
- Internal Audit reviewed the process and provided safeguards for the system’s application and physical location.
- Network Services contributed the network and system security required to launch the application.
- Treasury Services provided meaningful financial input along with recommendations to improve practice guidelines.
- University Computer Center supplied the secured site where the Web and SQL servers reside.

Because Parking and Transportation services interact directly with customers, the established policies and procedures were affected as a result of this innovative website. The Student's were now provided the opportunity to purchase parking subscriptions from the comforts of their own home as opposed to arriving on campus in the early morning hours to stand in long lines. Additionally, the administrative costs in supporting this event were reduced by 34%. The implementation of this e-commerce tool encouraged the shifting of sales to 80% credit card transactions resulting in less cash handling on behalf of the customer service representatives. Additionally, this successful website eliminated the need to transfer inventory to an offsite location large enough to accommodate historical procedures.

By converting the manual process of purchasing parking decals into an automated process, the Department of Business Services was able to streamline operations, improve efficiencies, and increase overall customer satisfaction through providing service excellence. Although the initial administrative costs experienced have only been moderately decreased, we expect future cost savings to become more substantial as the customer service team gains experience in working with this new technology.

VCU's Parking Decal Subscription Website was a technological breakthrough, enthusiastically received by the students and the university. A customer service survey inquiring satisfaction stated that 96% of all respondents look forward to using this method when purchasing parking subscriptions in the future. Additionally, the implementation of this innovative technological process improved staff efficiency while increasing confidence, resulting in an energized team. This initiative has received considerable interest from other universities as well as Cardinal Tracking Inc., a leading parking software development company.

The Department of Business Services' vision includes expanding this integrated application to other areas within the university including but not limited to: Athletics, Dining Services and Enrollment Services.