

Tulane Bicyclists, Drivers Voice Their Opinions

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New Orleans - In the spring of 2003, Tulane students from the campus Office of Environmental Affairs (OEA) developed and launched an online survey designed to assess the climate for cycling on and around Tulane campus. Through their own experiences on the saddle and behind the wheel, the students had observed that many cyclists and drivers were putting themselves and each other at risk through dangerous behaviors. In response, they designed their survey to assess whether cyclists and drivers are aware of the “share-the-road” rules, and if so, were they following them. What emerged was a portrait of the many faces of bikers, pedestrians, and drivers in the Tulane community.

The students were surprised to learn that the vast majority of the respondents to the survey considered themselves cyclists as well as drivers. Ninety-eight percent reported owning or have regular access to both a bicycle and a car. About half said they rode their bike weekly or daily and almost three-quarters drive at least one or more times per week. Only 7% said that they do not drive at all.

Respondents overwhelmingly knew the basic rules of the road - bicyclists have the legal right to share the road with motorists, cyclists must obey all traffic signals, and drivers must slow down and give cyclists room when passing. Although 99% of respondents said that it was required to ride at night with lights, only half of those that choose to ride after dark reported that they use some type of light.

Eighty-eight percent of respondents correctly identified “on the road, riding with traffic” as the required position for a cyclist. However, almost one-fifth reported that they ride either on the sidewalk, or exclusively against traffic. Riding on the right is safer because a driver is more likely to spot a bicyclist when they are scanning traffic, especially when they are about to make a right turn onto a busy street. In addition to being safer, Louisiana state law requires that a bicyclist must “ride as near to the right side of the roadway as practicable”.

Of most concern to the students was the fact that 97% of respondents said they do not check for cyclists before opening the car door when parked on the street. Most urban cyclists are familiar with the sometimes tragic phenomena of “getting doored”. In a well documented accident last year, a local artist and performer, Lucas Cox, was killed on his bicycle on Camp Street when he was ran over by a truck as he swerved to miss an opening car door.

Most respondents listed poor surface conditions of the road, the lack of bike lanes, and dangerous drivers as the greatest barriers to cycling in New Orleans. One hundred and fifty people chose to elaborate on their feelings by writing additional, often passionate comments. Some pedestrians expressed their frustrations with sharing the sidewalk space on campus with cyclists that “ZOOM past me on the sidewalk without a sound or a warning”. Others were concerned that cyclists “don’t have a good place to ride. The side

walks are usually full of pedestrians and the streets have discourteous cars”. The comments ran the gamut from bike rack inquiries to complaints about cyclists who don’t follow the rules of the road.

The survey was advertised through a Tulane Daily News email, word of mouth, and a “Spotlight” link from the Tulane homepage to attract a diverse group of respondents. On October 22, Adam from Adam’s Bicycle World randomly selected two winners--Robin Stead of Cell and Molecular Biology and Caroline Mang of the Annual Fund--from the survey participants to receive a free bicycle tune-up (\$45 value) and a \$50 gift certificate from the bookstore.

The online survey was just one of many activities initiated through a federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration grant awarded to OEA last year. The one-year grant supports the development of a comprehensive safe biking/safe driving education campaign specifically targeted at Tulane students.