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Institutions solving the “Tragedy of the Commons”

The “Tragedy of the Commons” is appropriately named due to the waste of resources in a situation where one might not expect waste to occur at first glance. This is the idea that if something is commonly owned, then it will often times lose most if not all value; usually in the case of natural resources, e.g. water supplies, forestry, lakes and rivers for fishing, farmland, etc. and sometimes in man-made instances like transportation of cars over a bridge and the number of parking spaces in a public garages and parking lots, like the UMBC situation, for example. Therefore the value of these resources decreases dramatically, and is often either taken for granted or is completely exhausted of value, and the resource no longer exists.

Appropriators are often referred to as the users of these resources, and can play many different roles, i.e. improving them in the methods of producing or providing for them, or the more common role of creating something fabricated out of the raw materials. In the case of the UMBC parking situation, the many students, faculty, and other commuters and residents are the appropriators, but the only role that they play is unfortunately using the parking spots, thus not creating any solution to the problem.

Institutions can solve the overall problem of the “tragedy of the commons” mainly because institutions, both formal and informal, are available and created to designate organization of available resources and create rules that ‘govern’ how these resources may be used. In fact, the UMBC parking problem has been handled well, considering all of the circumstances, because a formal institution has been created to designate specific

zones for each group that parks at the UMBC campus. It seems as if the previous designation of times when parking was permitted, similar to that found in cities, was revised to lower the chance of further conflict in the community. All of the appropriators have inherently agreed to this set of rules by being an active member of the academic community, and so the option of choice to participate in the formal institution is narrowed to the simply philosophy of a community decision over an individual one.

As a result, the community has a higher priority, and arguably a higher stake, in the overall scheme in this example of ‘commons.’ Many people have expressed individual concerns, which may be considered an informal institution; when someone realizes they can not change something they complain because that is the next best thing. Another example of an informal institution that helps the individual mindset cope with this great change is the idea of factoring the expectation of parking tickets, usually considered to be bad, but now normal. It is now customary to expect some kind of parking ticket in the appropriator’s usage of the UMBC service of parking near campus.

The end goal of solving this problem with the desired outcome occurred: the parking shortage was solved in a way that preserves an adequate, and unfortunately not an exemplified, level of content with the ability to leave cars unattended for some duration in an organized efficient, and not wasteful, method. It should be considered that as a result of any change, there will be some level of discomfort with all of the players of any ‘game’ and that as a result of one institution being created to solve the problem; another institution can also be created as a by-product. Any amount of theory can formulate a prediction of what those secondary institutions will be, but the utmost caution should be taken in more delicate situations.