Evaluation of Penn State’s Skateboarding Ban and Recommendations for Improving the Climate for Skateboarding at Penn State

Prepared for

Penn State’s Undergraduate Student Government

By

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March 29, 2001

This report evaluates the existing ban on skateboarding at Penn State and recommends reform due to injustices in the ban and student opinion.
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Executive Summary

Penn State does not allow skateboarding on campus due to vandalism that has occurred. To determine whether or not the Undergraduate Student Government should reform this policy, I conducted interviews with the Penn State Police Investigations Supervisor and the Director of Judicial Affairs.

The existing ban assumes that skaters will damage Penn State property, singles out skateboards, and does not allow for the use of long boards (longer skateboards incapable of causing physical damage). This ban also overlooks the transportation potential of skateboards.

Student opinion was determined via a survey. Sixty percent of students feel that skateboarding should be permitted on campus, and most students know someone who skateboards.

Due to the voice of students and unjust assumptions in the ban, the Undergraduate Student Government should seek alternatives to the current ban on skateboarding at Penn State.
Introduction and Purpose Statement

In the past decade skateboarding has become a prominent sport for people of all ages. It is a means by which many are able to exercise and enjoy the paved world that so many of us live in. But despite the growing presence of skateboarding as a recreational sport, the Pennsylvania State University feels that skateboarding is “inconsistent with the essential values of the University community” and should therefore be banned on campus (Student Guide). At a school of this size, with many students who enjoy skateboarding, it is inappropriate for Penn State to totally ban skateboarding at the University Park Campus.

Purpose, Scope, and Methodology

The purpose of this report is to determine why skateboarding is banned at Penn State and if our Undergraduate Student Government should lobby to lift the ban. The decision of whether or not to lift the ban should be based on the appropriateness of the existing ban and the feelings of Penn State students in regards to skateboarding.

To better understand this issue, I have located the current codes and conducted casual open interviews with the Penn State Police Investigations Supervisor, L. Stewart Neff, and the Director of Judicial Affairs, Joe Puzycki. I have also conducted a cross-sectional student survey to determine student feelings on the issue. Students self-administered the closed question surveys. In an attempt to get a representative sample, I chose to pass out surveys in two different classes, preventing myself from handpicking subjects or relying on my group of friends for data. A total of 70 completed surveys were returned by the student sample.

Organization of Report

The following report analyzes the issue of skateboarding on campus in a step-by-step manner. The first section, Origin of Ban, quotes the current code and addresses the causes of the current code. The second section, Injustices of Ban, addresses the injustices of a total ban on skateboarding. The third section, Prominence of Skateboarding, deals with the prominence of skateboarding today and the feelings of Penn State students. The fourth section, Conclusions, shows that the total ban on skateboarding should be lifted.
Concluding the report, a recommendation section outlines a plan of action based on the conclusions.

**Origin of Ban**

Skateboarding was permitted on campus until 1992, when a University committee decided to amend the existing bike, rollerblade, and skateboard regulations. The amended regulations are currently in effect and include the following statement, “Use of skateboards on campus is prohibited” (PSU Police, 2). Both Joe Puzycki, Director of judicial affairs, and L. Stewart Neff, Penn State Police Investigations Supervisor, attributed the ban on skateboarding to vandalism and issues of student safety.

**Skateboard Vandalism**

A *Collegian* article from June of 1990 titled “Skateboarders Cause Havoc on Campus” offers some light into one of Penn State’s motivations for banning skateboards on campus. This article elaborates on the physical damage caused by persons skateboarding on wooden bench slats, picnic furniture, garbage containers, and flowerpots. The article warns of legal action against “skateboarders caught spoiling University property” (Herman, 1). But the article claims that the University will attempt to solve the problem without banning skateboards from campus.

A little over a year later, September of ’91, *The Collegian* ran another article entitled “Skateboarders Beware: University Considers Banning Skateboarding Throughout Campus.” This article identified chipped concrete as one of the “biggest problems,” and also reports the University spending “about $3,550 to repair and replace about 20 benches in the Herman G. Fisher Plaza area because of skateboarding” (Thompson, 1). Skateboard vandalism was obviously an issue on campus, but I have been able to find no examples of the University attempting to employ “alternative measures” to deal with the issue.
Student Safety

The other major cause of the skateboarding ban was liability. It is unreasonable for Penn State to feel liable for injuries that I may inflict upon myself while participating in a personal hobby. Obviously skateboarding, as with any movement-oriented activity, offers the possibility of injury to bystanders. It seems reasonable that if, while skateboarding on campus, I injure a fellow student, I am responsible for the repercussions of my actions. How is this any different from hitting someone with a car? Maybe Penn State should ban cars on campus to prevent pedestrians from getting hit by cars. While injury is a consideration, the University would not be liable for injury caused by skateboarders, to themselves or others.

The prominent motivation for the ban was vandalism, as Joe Puzycki stressed. But Iain Borden, a lecturer in Architectural History and Sub-Dean of the Faculty of the Built environment at the Bartlet, University College London, offers some further insight; “in rendering space for themselves, skateboarders threaten accepted definitions of space, taking over space conceptually as well as physically and so striking at the heart of what everyone else understands as the city.” Part of the motivation for this ban may have come from the fact that skateboarding is seen as non-conforming. In either case, the University appears to have banned skateboarding in order to prevent skateboard related damage.

Injustices of Ban

The presence of injustices in Penn State’s total ban on skating is cause enough for reform. Injustices exist in the ban for several reasons: the preventative nature of the ban, the singling out of a specific device, and the all-encompassing nature of the ban.

Injustices are inherent in a ban that is enacted as a preventative measure. To prevent physical damage that could be caused by skateboards, Penn State has banned the total use of skateboards. The concept of innocent until proven guilty seems relevant here. Just because someone rides a skateboard, it does not mean they are about to break benches or chip concrete ledges. There are plenty of tricks that can be done on a skateboard in a parking lot or other flat area. Also, a skateboard is an efficient means of
transportation at this pedestrian dominated campus. With Penn State’s plans to close off roads on campus, such as Pollock and Garner, alternate means of transportation will be needed on a campus as large as University Park.

Regardless of their transportation uses, skateboards do have the potential for physical damage, but rollerblades and BMX bikes are used for the same types of tricks that damage property. If you watch an extreme sports competition, you will see similar use of ledges and rails by all three of these devices in the street competition. The injustice here comes from the fact that rollerblades and bikes are respected for their other uses, while skateboards are seen only as implements of destruction. The same is also true of the student safety issue. Students could just as easily be hit by a fellow student on a bike or a pair of rollerblades. This type of discrimination against skateboards is unjust.

The code is also unjust due to its all-encompassing nature. The code defines a skateboard as “a board mounted on roller skate-type wheels” (PSU Police, 1). This definition undoubtedly includes long boards, longer skateboards with larger, softer wheels. The fact is long boards are strictly for “street surfing,” for transportation. Due to their length, long boards are incapable of aerial tricks, making physical destruction with the use of a long board impossible. Penn State has chosen to ignore this fact, as friends of mine have been cited for using these devices on campus.

Injustices clearly exist in the current skateboarding ban. If Penn State wants to limit vandalism and prevent liability, they should address these issues directly. Making a universal ban on skateboarding is unfair to the student body.

**Prominence of Skateboarding**

Penn State is an extremely large community and its diversity must be respected. If a substantial amount of people disagree with policies of their community or if policies conflict with the interests of the community, then reform is necessary. Just such a scenario exists in regards to skateboarding at Penn State. Skateboarding has exploded in popularity since the late 80’s. It is now a widely televised event and people such as Tony Hawk have become international stars due to their skateboarding ability. But the prominence of skateboarding is not reflected in the policies of Penn State.
To determine the amount of student interest at Penn State, I conducted a cross-sectional student survey. The student sample came from two classes at University Park. I administered the survey in this way to prevent my own biases from interfering with the selection of the representative sample. Of the 70 students surveyed, 45 were males and 25 were females. The results of the survey can be seen on the following page (figure 1). Of the students surveyed, 27 (38.6%) have skateboarded with all but 3 students (95.7%) knowing someone who does skateboard. More than half the students surveyed, 38 (54.3%), were not even aware that skateboarding is not permitted on campus. Forty two students, 60%, feel that students should have the right to skateboard on campus. The survey has shown the prominence of skateboarding as an acceptable recreational pastime among current students. In fact, the Colleagian’s “Skateboarders Beware” article quoted some non-skateboarding students as supporting a students right to skateboard on campus. One student said in reference to skateboards, “They’re annoying (but) they have their right” (Thompson, 5).

The problem is that a student at Penn State’s University Park Campus has nowhere to legally skateboard, as State College also has a no skateboarding ordinance. Penn State is a large university with facilities for many types of activities, some of which have much less student interest than skateboarding, yet the university does not see fit to build a park for skateboarding. So for students who enjoy skateboarding there are two options, continue to skate despite legislation or just stop skating. Both Stewart Neff and Joe Puzycki reported that most people caught skateboarding on campus are repeat offenders. This shows that people are not going to just stop participating in something they enjoy.

The survey has shown that a majority of students think that skateboarding should be allowed on campus. The community that is Penn State must respect the wishes of its members. It is clear that the current ban on skateboarding is not concurrent with the majority of this student community.
Questions

1. Do you skateboard, or have you ever skateboarded?
2. Do you know, or have you ever known, anyone who skateboards?
3. Are you aware that Penn State prohibits skateboarding on this campus?
4. Do you think that students should have the right to skateboard on campus?
Conclusions

Through the analysis of Penn State’s ban on skateboarding, it was determined that the main motivation for the ban was vandalism on campus. Instead of dealing with individual issues of vandalism, the University apparently felt it easier to just ban skateboards totally from campus. As representatives of the student body, the Undergraduate Student Government has the responsibility of making this University a better place for the student body. If the ban is unjust or does not correlate with the desires of the student body, the USG must attempt to abolish the skateboarding ban.

Injustices in the ban have been identified. First, the ban assumes that a skateboarder is a vandal. Second, the ban singles out skateboards as the cause of physical damage, disregarding the damage potential of rollerblades and BMX bikes. Third, the all-inclusiveness of the ban even prevents the use of long boards, skateboards with no potential for causing physical damage.

This ban on skateboarding also conflicts with student opinion. Sixty percent of students feel that skateboarding should be allowed on campus. At a campus of this size, a much smaller percentage of students would still necessitate lifting the ban. Due to the afore mentioned reasons, the Undergraduate Student Government should seek to lift the existing ban on skateboarding and attempt to deal with the problem of vandalism in another manner.

Recommendations

In order to remedy the conflict between the ideals of our community and the rules of our community, I recommend reforming the current ban on skateboarding. The following suggestions should help to improve the climate for skateboarding at Penn State:

1. Call for a vote by students as to whether or not to lift the skateboarding ban.
2. Look into building a skate park on campus.
3. Look into targeting vandalism as opposed to skateboarding in general.
4. Assess the possibility of allowing skateboarding on certain parts of campus.


