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At RISD, pink is the way to go green

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Nate Phipps, a Rhode Island School of Design junior, sprays a coat of pink paint on the frame of a bike-share bicycle. RISD students who pay a \$5 annual fee can use free bikes available around campus.

The Providence Journal / Steve Szydlowski

PROVIDENCE — Whether or not they last, at least the colors seem appropriate: Day-Glo pink for the mishmash of used two-wheelers at the Rhode Island School of Design and a refined gold and purple satin finish for the sporty new ones at Brown University.

Some enterprising college students at two city universities this spring are rolling out bike-sharing programs, in which students can use free community bikes available around campus.

Rhode Island School of Design juniors Nate Phipps and Madeleine McGarrity started Pink Bikes in the fall as a project for one of Phipps' classes. Two bikes hit the East Side campus with nary a lock or a signout sheet, just a bright pink cloth affixed to the frame with the picture of a flamingo riding a unicycle that has become the program's de facto symbol.

Now that Phipps has permission from the university to develop the project further as an independent study for course credit, Pink Bikes is set to release close to 30 bikes this week for student use around the city. The bikes, which range from cruisers to mountain bikes to some street cycles, have been donated and paired with a hardy black lock.

They'll be available to students for six-hour blocks from the former Rhode Island Hospital Trust Building at 15 Westminster St., the freshman quadrangle on College Hill at 30 Waterman St., and the Moshassuck Square Apartments, a student housing complex near the State House.

Brown University senior Carly Sieff and members of the Brown Outing Club launched a bike-share last week, taking some of its university-funding to buy three new Schwinn Cruisers and four Mongoose mountain bikes. The bikes, which come with a key lock, are available from an office in the university student center and can be signed out for a day by students who pay a \$5 yearly membership fee.

The club hopes that if the program is successful this semester, they can form a separate club and offer many more bikes next year. "We've been getting really good responses so far. People want to bike but they just don't bring them to college or haven't been on one in a long time," says Sieff.

The concept of bike sharing has been around since the late 1960s, but it has taken on increasing interest as a way to reduce carbon emissions in compact urban areas and a healthier way to travel. At least 70 colleges and universities nationwide offer free bike-share and bicycle-rental programs, according to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

Cities have promoted bicycle-sharing as a key link between mass transit systems and a person's ultimate destination. The world's largest program is Paris' network of 20,000 bicycles launched in 2007. On this side of the Atlantic, Washington, D.C., introduced a 100-bike program called SmartBikeDC last year, and Montreal is set to roll out its own program in May. Boston has one in the works, thanks to a \$40,000 grant from the state.

Even the City of Providence has looked to get into the game: high school youths helping the city expand the Providence After School Alliance have recommended the city consider a bike share among potential new initiatives.

But while these programs seem to work well in European cities — and there is growing interest stateside — Americans might not be ready for it. Early (and perhaps overly altruistic) attempts to simply release a number of bicycles to the streets for unrestricted use tended to be quickly crippled by theft and vandalism.

"Americans tend to think of bikes as toys. It's a different mindset for Europeans, who see the bike as a serious mode of transportation," says David Fastovsky, a University of Rhode Island professor of geosciences who helped launch URide, a bike-sharing program at the university in the fall of 2003. "Plus, in our society, individual possession and ownership is something that is stressed. We don't really think of things as communal property."

Video



Pink Bikes is a bike-share program

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URIde, says Fastovsky, did not last even a semester, after more than half of its 30 or so fluorescent orange-painted used bikes, which did not need to be signed out or secured, vanished or were damaged beyond repair.

In Providence, the volunteer group Recycle-A-Bike, which hosts bike repair classes and refurbishes donated bikes for resale, launched Yellow Bikes in 2001 to serve the Southside and Olneyville. That too didn't last.

“Basically what it boils down to is accountability, which is why it's great for a college campus, because you can take down a student's information, or have them leave a deposit,” according to Maggie Burrus-Granger, who runs Earn-A-Bike, a program that evolved from Yellow Bikes, in which participants can learn to repair bikes, and, with enough credit hours, get a free bike.

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