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Key Control Strategies for a Secure, Cost-Efficient, and Sustainable Fleet

BY TRICIA BUTLER

University fleets play a pivotal role in campus operations. Whether a vehicle transports students to and from campus, carries equipment for facility maintenance, or enables faculty and staff to attend off-campus events, each one is valuable both in purpose and replacement cost.

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However, managing fleets comes with significant challenges—particularly in terms of security, rising costs, and sustainability. Here are some ways campuses can dramatically improve university fleet operations through a relatively simple strategy: implementing an effective key management plan.

Security

Failing to properly secure vehicle keys is a major risk. For example, if a fleet department stores keys on a pegboard or in a basic lockbox, anyone who accesses the area can easily remove a key, regardless of if they're authorized to do so, and access a fleet vehicle.

Unauthorized use of fleet vehicles not only interferes with routine university operations but also increases the institution's liability risk. For example, someone recklessly driving a branded university vehicle puts others at risk and endangers the university's reputation. In addition, if the vehicle is involved an accident, it can lead to higher insurance costs and pose legal risks, especially if the university's key control practices are inadequate.

Key Control Strategies

- **Secure keys properly:** Instead of a pegboard or lockbox, fleet managers should consider an electronic key management system that secures all keys in tamper-proof steel drawers or solid wall-mounted panels that lock down each key individually. Key control technology enhances security by restricting access to authorized personnel only, reducing the risks and costs associated with misplaced or stolen keys and vehicles.
- **Automatically authenticate drivers:** A key control system should require drivers to scan a fingerprint, enter a PIN, or swipe a card to gain access to keys.
- **Enable security alerts:** A system should be able to alert managers in real time via text or email if someone tries to take a key without proper authorization or fails to return a key within a specific time frame. These measures help ensure immediate action in the event of unauthorized key access, encourage employees to practice good stewardship of keys, and protect the university from liability.

Rising Costs

Tens of thousands of dollars go toward modifications, maintenance, fuel, and more over the course of a vehicle's fleet life. Fleet managers are tasked with achieving readiness rates year in and year out as costs climb and budgets shrink.

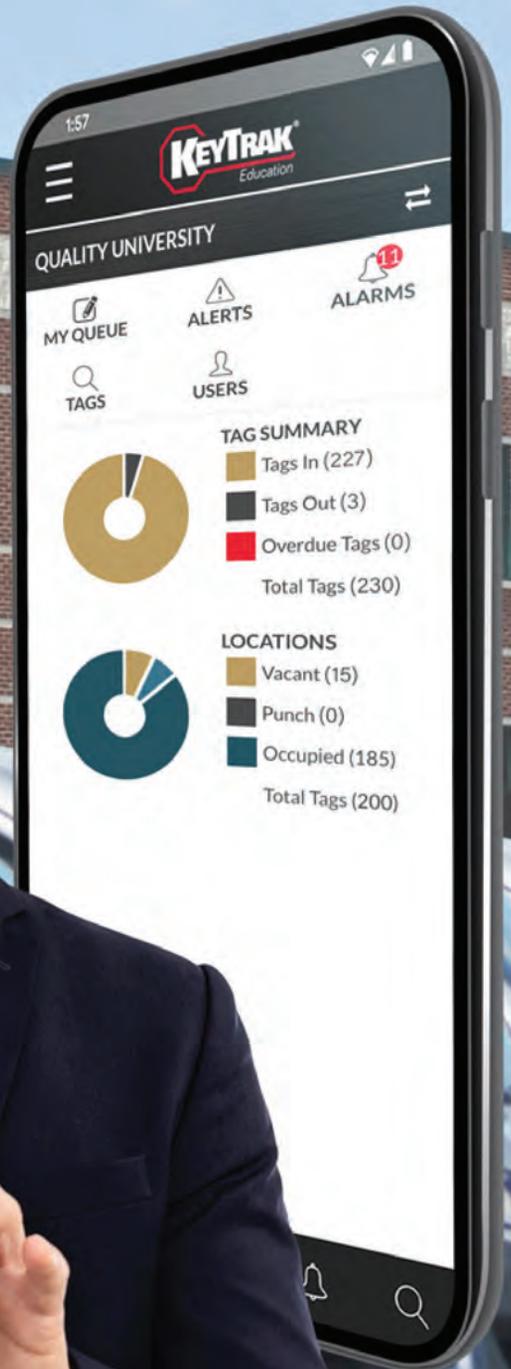
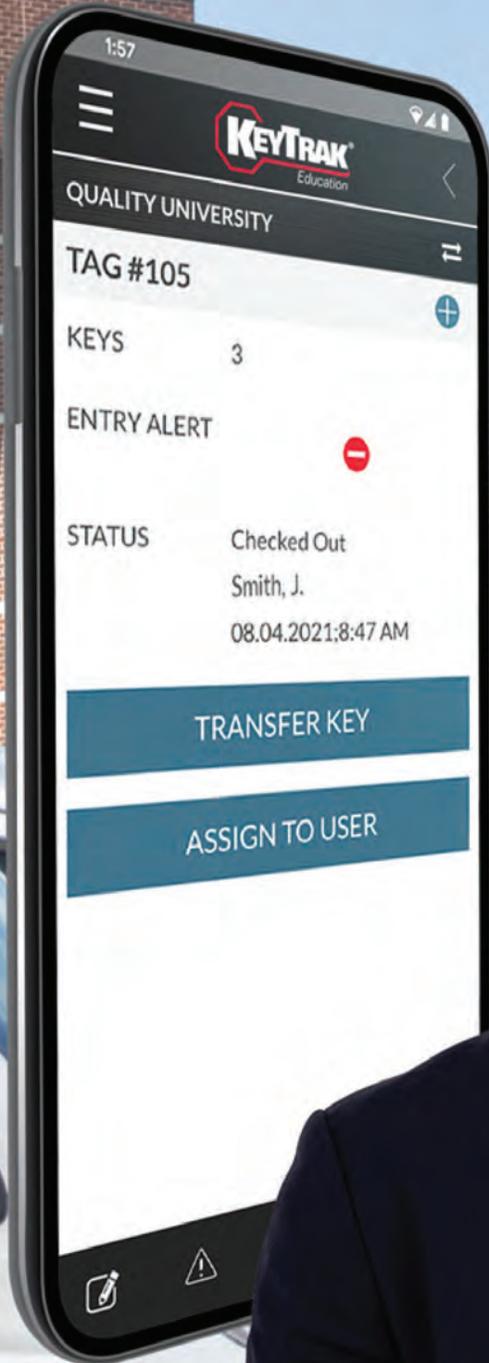
If an institution is operating on a limited budget, there's no room for inefficiency. When evaluating cost-saving measures, eliminating time-consuming manual key control processes is a good place to start. This issue alone wastes valuable resources,

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from lost productivity to key replacement costs. A process that requires someone to manually sign keys in or out delays staff or faculty getting the vehicles they need. That's not to mention the interruptions throughout the fleet manager's day when they need to

check a key in or out. Errors or omissions on the key log lead to further complications.

Another significant source of cost inefficiencies is maintenance, which is only compounded by supply chain challenges.

To extend vehicle lifespans and avoid costly repairs, timely maintenance is crucial. Inadequate maintenance drives up costs as over-worked vehicles face emergency roadside repairs or pricey part replacements.

Monitoring a fleet's high-use vehicles is a priority since they often require the most maintenance. However, it's important not to forget vehicles that tend to stay on the lot. When vehicles are stagnant, tires can rot, batteries can degrade, fuel can go bad, and fluid leaks can develop.

Key Control Strategies

- **Digitize key logs:** To save time and ensure an accurate key log, electronic key control systems can automatically record who took a key, when, and why. With accurate key logs, fleet managers are better equipped to right-size the fleet, maintain timely maintenance schedules, and achieve a high readiness rate.
- **Enter vehicle mileage upon key return:** Key control systems can prompt users to enter mileage when they return a key, helping fleet managers streamline maintenance schedules. Managers can then review daily reports to find discrepancies and track maintenance.
- **Review key activity logs to identify under- or overutilization:** The data key control systems generate, such as usage patterns and mileage records, helps inform decision making. By having access to detailed reports, fleet managers can make strategic choices regarding budget allocation, maintenance schedules, and vehicle assignments.
- **Reserve keys when vehicles are due for maintenance:** When a vehicle is approaching a mileage milestone, fleet managers can reserve that key to temporarily remove the vehicle from rotation.

Sustainability

Universities rely heavily on their fleets for various functions. However, excessive use increases fuel consumption, which not only strains the university's budget but also contributes to higher carbon emissions, amplifying the institution's environmental impact.

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Unnecessary use also accelerates wear and tear on vehicles, reducing their overall lifespans. Addressing these sustainability challenges is difficult if drivers put “mystery miles” on vehicles, using them without permission or for unauthorized reasons.

Key Control Strategies

- Track key usage patterns to optimize utilization: Key control systems’ ability to automatically record who took a key, when, and why provides a comprehensive overview of fleet

utilization. With this data, fleet managers can allocate resources efficiently to achieve sustainability objectives and foster responsible fleet management practices.

- Review mileage history to identify wasteful use: By enabling precise tracking of fleet keys, electronic key control helps reduce wasteful fleet use. Fleet managers can detect mystery miles by comparing mileage accrued on a vehicle against the checkout reason provided.

- Assign vehicles based on job roles to conserve resources: To prevent unnecessary wear and tear on vehicles and reduce fuel emissions, fleet managers can restrict access to certain vehicles based on job roles. For example, a recruiter would be able to check out a fuel-efficient sedan but not a van.

Using technology to improve key management empowers fleet managers to enhance campus safety, optimize operations for better cost control, and promote responsible resource management. With effective key control, university fleets can continue to drive campus operations forward for years to come.

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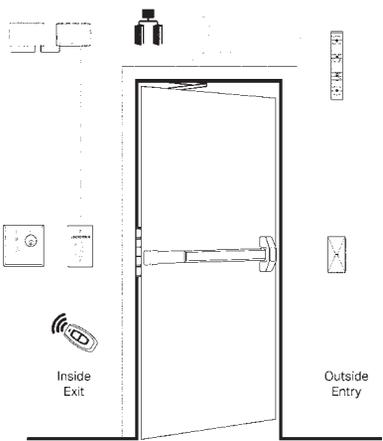


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 **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Tricia Butler is a Senior Field Manager with KeyTrak, Inc. For over two decades, she has helped some of the largest higher education campuses across the western U.S. minimize key management risks and operate more efficiently.

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