Hydrogen Cars Are Not Up to Speed, Yet

A flawed but valiant attempt to combat global warming and conserve natural fuel sources

BMW has recently announced pacesetting plans to introduce the Hydrogen 7 to a small pool of U.S. consumers later this year, ideally becoming the true (read: environmentally friendly) "Ultimate Driving Machine." The vehicle will utilize an internal combustion engine capable of being powered on either gasoline—thus providing the common consumer demand of 300 miles—or on liquid hydrogen for about 125 miles.

So is hydrogen the solution for decreasing our dependency on oil, or will the first models merely end up as dead as General Motors' electric vehicles?

With more time, money and engineering entrepreneurship, mass-produced hydrogen-powered cars may be possible. Yet do we want to wait for an alternative that may not be the best alternative, or should we seek what's viable at the present moment? Currently, plug-in electric hybrid vehicles (PHEVs) are a better, cheaper and more readily available option than hydrogen-powered cars—despite how snazzy advertising and quick science may make the hydrogen cars appear.

At first glance, hydrogen seems like the perfect solution for our infamous car culture, which chugs gasoline faster than a pre-initiated frat boy downs a bounty of beer. According to the April issue of *Scientific American*, US Vehicles consume 383 milllion gallons of gasoline a day; do the math and you have about 140 billion gallons annually. That's about two-thirds of total national oil consumption, half of which is imported from overseas.

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Hydrogen, unlike gasoline, can come from both renewable and non-renewable resources. BMW, in their brochure for the Hydrogen 7, highlights the car's green selling point: the electricity used to split water molecules, which provides an alternative to fossil fuels, could come from renewable energy sources.

However, the use of renewable energy sources for hydrogen-powered cars currently does not appear to be economically feasible, particularly as only two percent of energy production currently falls into the reusable category. A 2004 California Academy of Sciences study even foresaw that fossil fuels would be the source of hydrogen for "several decades."

While hydrogen fuels generate less carbon dioxide than conventional internal combustion engines, its production, according to the March/April issue of MIT's *Technology Review*, generates four times more pollution than a vehicle that runs on methane, diesel or gasoline.

With global warming making its presence noticeably felt and heard, it's time for automakers—and consumers—to take stronger, more tangible action. As of 2003, transportation emissions account for one-third of all U.S. carbon dioxide emissions.

While hydrogen vehicles would require an entirely new network of pipelines and fuel stations, PHEVs are *currently* capable of reducing petroleum consumption and emissions. The half-gas, half-electric vehicle that allows its battery to be recharged overnight provides a better bet than hydrogen-powered cars—or, really, any cars.

The Department of Energy (DOE) made a smart move earlier this month in granting $14 million in research for plug-in hybrid batteries.

Currently, the DOE estimates that hybrids produce 22 percent fewer greenhouse gases than purely petroleum-powered cars; for PHEVs, the reduction stands at 36 percent.

PHEVs are also enormously economically friendly. At an average cost of $3 per gallon of gas, a non-hybrid car costs 8 to 20 cents per mile, according to the advocacy group CalCars. With a PHEV, taking into account the average U.S. electricity rate of 9 cents per kilowatt-hour (kWh), these costs drop to 2 to 4 cents per mile.

And, if all automotive alternatives fail, we can always ride bikes.

A Major Conflict of Interest Rates

Financial aid woes worsened by crooked administrators' actions

We as students share many attributes, but two above all: we're broke, and any free time we scrounge up comes at a premium. Loaded down with excessive units, homework enough to drown in, and desperate attempts to see our friends and lovers, any brief opportunity we find to hold a job comes with the serendipitous discovery of a paycheck waiting for us twice each month. This is hard enough—paying for college, we think, will come later. College loans carry low interest rates, and who better to co-sign your loan than the federal government?

And therein, as they say, lies the rub. Student Loan Xpress (SLiX, for the purposes of this article), the eighth-largest student loaner in the country, has been taking advantage of students by giving kickbacks to financial aid officials at three schools: Johns Hopkins, Widener and Capella Universities. Coincidentally, SLiX is on the "preferred lender" lists for all of these schools, making students much more likely to borrow from them.

Now, New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo reports that financial aid officials at Columbia University, University of Texas, and University of Southern California hold substantial stock holdings in Education Lending Group, SLiX's parent company. SLiX, amazingly, is a "preferred lender" at these fine institutions as well.

To deal with the rising costs of our school system that so many of our parents nostalgically remember as free, or costing "just a buck," we poor, huddled masses are often forced to take out loans to supplement the anemic financial aid that we may receive. We are allowed to borrow from whomever we want, but what do we know? It is the job, the responsibility, and the mandate of the financial aid officers to provide us with advice to help us pay for college in the best way possible, not to act as walking, talking advertisements for the highest bidder. College is already hard enough to pay for, and we don't need our buddies at the financial aid office working against us.

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And it's not as though the response from the colleges and SLiX's new parent company, CIT Group, which bought Education Lending Group, haven't been harsh. Upon these discoveries, the financial aid officials and loan representatives have been placed on paid leave, a first-rate punishment for anyone dedicated to the fine art of scamming the starving student.

We at City on a Hill Press feel that these financial aid employees have betrayed their responsibilities to students, that this loan company is taking advantage of a student population that is short on cash as it is, and that those indicted in this scandal should face the worst things coming to them. Paid leave is not a punishment; it is a vacation.

Three cheers for Andrew Cuomo for uncovering this scandal before another generation of college students fall victim to who-knows-how-many coerced financial aid officials and their "preferred lenders."

So it goes. Let's just hope Cuomo can keep his job to carry this through to the end. We hear government attorneys have a pretty short shelf life these days.