



Making the Most of Campus Recycling

EXPERT INSIGHTS

BY ROSALIND FOURNIER

You'd be hard pressed today to find a college or university campus that doesn't have a prominent recycling program. The question is not if your campus recycles—it's how effective your program is. Are your students committed to getting recyclables in the right bins? Do you know exactly what your recycling-collection vendor can and can't take? Have you educated your campus community about all the recycling opportunities you offer?

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Given the sheer size of a college or university community, these institutions have a unique responsibility and opportunity to make a big impact with their recycling efforts. To do so, however, requires more than putting out recycling receptacles and hoping students will take the hint. Forethought, planning, and having the right products on campus to encourage proper execution can make the difference between a well-meaning (but not very effective) recycling program and one that's truly successful.

Brooke Pertner is the sales manager for hospitality and property manager at Commercial Zone, a company that provides site furnishing solutions for a wide range of needs, environments, and budgets. They sell universities and colleges a lot of recycling containers in all shapes, sizes, and styles, so Pertner has become an expert in helping schools make the most of their recycling programs. She recently took time

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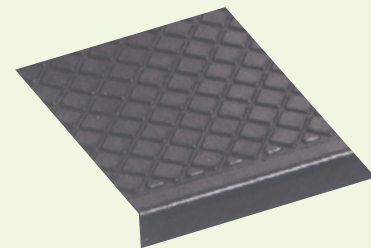


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to share some of her best tips for maximizing recycling efforts on campus. Here's her advice.

Start with the Students

Pertner says before embarking on a recycling-program overhaul, it's a good idea to start by gauging the level of student commitment. "Of the universities I've worked with that have been the most successful," she says, "their first step is to poll their students: 'What are your priorities around litter and recycling, and are you willing to compost?' The majority of the time, those students come back overwhelmingly with 'Yes, we want to do all of those things.'"

Establishing buy-in from the students accomplishes dual goals, Pertner says. First, it indicates students will actually use the recycling opportunities they provide on campus. Second, it helps universities align their values with those of their students, which can improve recruitment and retention efforts.

"The younger generation—the college-age kids—tend to have more of a focus on sustainability," she says, "and I think colleges and universities are recognizing that."

Take Inventory

Pertner recommends that before ordering products, clients should first take an inventory of what recycling products they already have, what needs to be replaced, and high-traffic areas that may require more or bigger trash and recycling bins.

"I recommend taking a good stock of your infrastructure," she says. "What do you have on your campus already? Do you have problem areas on your campus where you always find a lot of litter, or certain trash bins that are constantly overflowing and making it hard for your staff to keep up? Do your recycling receptacles include education about designated use?"

This should help you make decisions about what you need to keep your campus clean, make sure members of your community use the receptacles properly, and help your recycling-collection vendor get the most out of what they collect.

Get to Know Your Vendor

Recycling-collection vendors vary widely in what they will or won't accept. For a program to succeed, colleges and universities need to know exactly what that is for their specific vendor.

"You want to really understand what your vendor's capabilities are and what their supply chain is," Pertner recommends. "What types of plastics and cans can they recycle easily? Do they recycle paper? What is the expectation from a standpoint of having litter mixed in? Then you can match that up with what you offer on campus."

When the wrong things go in a recycling container, she says, it undermines the success of your program.

"That's something people tend not to think about. Your vendors are going to make more money if they have better-quality

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tonnage, so continuing to throw things they can't take into the supply chain disrupts the entire process." You're not recycling as much as you want if they have to sort more, and it drives the vendor's cost up, which could lead to higher rates for their services. In some cases, if the vendor is forced to spend time removing errant trash from the recycling pile, they might instead just toss it all into the landfill pile.

Make the Most of Leftovers

"If you are going to go down the road of composting, again, the key is having a good idea of what your composting vendor needs," Pertner says. Also consider placement: offering composting in the dorms might not be practical, so focus on areas like kitchens and dining halls.

One standout is Princeton University, which doesn't rely on an outside vendor but has instead created an in-house program:

the Sustainable Composting Research (S.C.R.A.P.) Lab. The university sends food scraps collected at various locations on campus to the S.C.R.A.P. Lab, where it's combined with a bulking agent/carbon source to create nutrient-rich compost used in campus landscaping.

Educate Your Community

The concept and execution of recycling might seem like a no brainer for college and university students, but Pertner says the devil is in the details. She emphasizes campus-wide education to make it as easy as possible for students to use the receptacles properly—which in turn makes it easier for your recycling vendor to make use of all your recyclables.

"The education around composting is probably the most important piece," she says. "When you're walking up to like a three-streamed setup, where it's litter,

recycle and compost, you need to have consistent education on the outside of it instructing what to put where. When you talk to somebody who executes this every day, you learn that when they continue the education, the tonnage they're giving to their vendors increases dramatically over time." Education can be as simple as signs with specific instructions on your receptacles. Pertner says Commercial Zone can customize recycling receptacles with personalized signs that spell out the details of what's okay to put inside.

"We can also mix in things like your logo to catch the student's eye, or a specialized look for the bins across campus so they're something students recognize and gravitate toward, helping reduce litter."

But don't stop there. "In the age of social media, which is free, you have a lot more opportunities to spread the word," she says. *continued...*

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“Do monthly tips, like ‘Did you know you can throw your eggshells in the compost?’ ‘Did you know milk jugs are made of highly recyclable plastic?’ These reminders reinforce your recycling guidelines. If you keep the message consistent, you have a lot of resources as a college or university. Try to get creative with it.”

Choose Recycling Receptacles that Are Also Sustainable

Commercial Zone sells an array of products that colleges, universities, and other institutions need, from industrial-strength trash receptacles to benches and planters. Recycling-specific products include material-specific recycling containers, side-by-side trash and recycling containers, and a “CanFactor” recycling container that crushes cans as they go in, reducing volume by as much as 80 percent.

Many of these products are made using recycled materials, and all are recyclable

after use; their new, fully customizable Avante Series is built with recycled plastic material that can help meet campus sustainability goals. Shipping containers are also made using recycled materials, and the company makes a point of packaging products in a way that reduces the number of boxes and material used whenever possible, Pertner says.

“I’ve worked in the packaging field for many years and now I’m in this field,” she says, “and at the end of the day, sustainability is good business while helping the environment.”

Brooke Pertner is the sales manager for hospitality and property manager at Commercial Zone, a company that provides site furnishing solutions for a wide range of needs, environments, and budgets.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rosalind Fournier is a freelance writer/editor in Homewood, Alabama where she lives with her husband and kids. She loves to read and looks forward to March Madness every year, though her bracket is usually a disaster.

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