



Landscaping Environments

**TRENDS AND ADVANTAGES THAT
MAKE PRIVATE COLLEGE GROUNDS
VITAL TO THE CAMPUS APPEAL**

BY ED BAUER

Across the nation's private colleges and universities, landscaping has evolved into both an art and a strategic investment—one that shapes student experience, recruitment, and retention. From immersive arboretums to biophilic learning landscapes, campuses are increasingly designed to blend architecture, sustainability, and wellness, creating environments that feel less like schools, and more like sanctuaries for the mind and body.

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Shaping First Impressions: Recruitment Starts at the Gate

Prospective students and their families are deeply influenced by campus aesthetics. Touring walkers often pause at the sight of vibrant quad lawns, sculptural pergolas, or wooded paths that evoke calm. Institutions have long recognized that landscaping is now part of their “face”—one that appears in brochures, on websites, and across social media.

- **Biophilic design on display.** In line with 2025 landscaping trends, colleges are integrating natural materials (like reclaimed stone and terracotta), multi-layer plantings, and pollinator gardens that double as outdoor classrooms—breathing new life into traditional grounds (homebuilding.co.uk+1best-collegereviews.org+1.)
- **Sensory corridors.** Walkways lined with native perennials, grasses, and flowering shrubs offer a palette of textures, scents, and colors, appealing to

modern students who seek a connection to nature amid academic pressures.

From Aesthetic to Welcome: Enhancing Campus Life

Landscaping isn't just for show—it fosters community, mental wellness, and belonging. Institutions are creating “outdoor third places” that draw students beyond lecture halls and dorms.

- **Pergolas and outdoor study nooks.** Equipped with weatherproof seating, Wi Fi, and lighting, these structures extend classroom space to the quad, encouraging creativity and social interaction.
- **Campus arboretums as living labs.** Many private colleges promote biodiversity and conservation through campus forests or arboreta. Vanderbilt University's arboretum with 190 species across 300+ acres is one example travelandleisure.com.
- **Campus lakes and water features.** Reflective ponds or streams, like Furman

University's lakeside Bell Tower setting, provide both aesthetic charm and calm retreats thoughtco.com+15travelandleisure.com+15educationdirectory.net+15.

- **Meditation gardens and labyrinths.** Designed for mindfulness and reflection, these pockets of serenity enhance student well-being, offering respite during high-stress periods.

Sustainability in the Soil

Environmental responsibility is translating into environmentally intelligent landscaping—carefully tailored to each region's climate and ecosystem.

- **Native plantings for climate resilience.** Colleges ditch exotic ornamentals in favor of drought-tolerant flower beds, wildflower borders, and butterfly gardens—a direct reflection of widespread garden trends .
- **Water stewardship.** Low-impact irrigation, rain gardens, and bioswales

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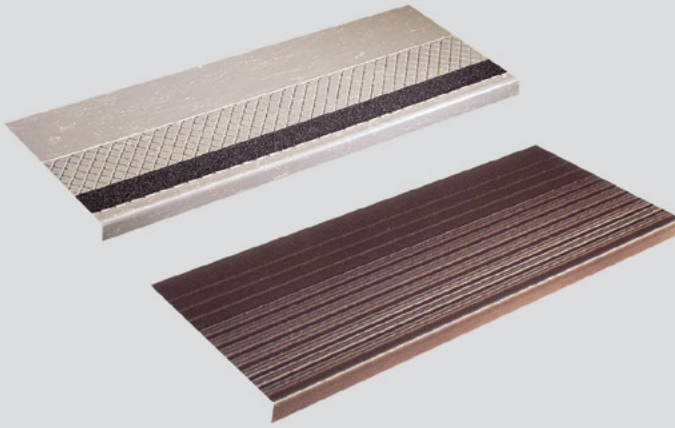


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- **Low-carbon hardscaping.** Natural stone paving replaces energy-intensive porcelain; recycled brick and local materials create ordinary spaces that stand the test of time.

Campus Carrying Prestige: Examples of the Most Beautiful

Many of America's most scenic private campuses set the standard:

- **Rhodes College (Memphis, TN).** Designated the #1 Most Beautiful College Campus by the Princeton Review in 2017, its stone Collegiate Gothic architecture sits within a certified Class IV arboretum with over 120 tree species (en.wikipedia.org+11axios.com+11travelandleisure.com+3en.wikipedia.org+3southernliving.com+3).

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- **Berry College (Mount Berry, GA).** This English Gothic inspired university sprawls across 27,000 acres, the world's largest contiguous campus, featuring fountains, walking trails, and wildlife habitats (southernliving.com.)
- **Mount Holyoke College (South Hadley, MA).** Landscaped by Olmsted & Sons around two lakes, waterfalls, woodland trails, and an organic garden, it reflects a longstanding ecological commitment (en.wikipedia.org+1businessinsider.in+1.)
- **Swarthmore College (PA).** Behind its Collegiate Gothic buildings lies a 425-acre arboretum—including Crum Woods and the Dean Bond Rose Garden—offering students both beauty and hands-on learning spaces (thoughtco.com+2bestcollegereviews.org+2aol.com+2.)
- **Florida Southern College (Lakeland,**

FL). Home to the world's largest collection of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed structures, its mile-long covered Esplanade ties together tranquil ponds and open green spaces with architectural coherence (architecturaldigest.com+1southernliving.com+1.)

Numbers Tell the Story

Private colleges dominate catalogs of America's most beautiful campuses:

- *Travel + Leisure, Conde Nast Traveler, Architectural Digest, Southern Living, and Business Insider* consistently highlight dozens of private institutions among top-50 lists.
- Tennessee alone saw two universities in the state earn high ranking: Belmont University at #11 and Rhodes at #30 on *Architectural Digest's* 53 prettiest campus list (axios.com+1travelandleisure.com+1c-tinsider.com+1travelandleisure.com+1.)

- *Southern Living's* storied "Most Beautiful Campuses in the South" roster credits Berry, Vanderbilt, Duke, Rollins, and Florida Southern College (southernliving.com+1southernliving.com+1).
- Nationally, dozens of private colleges—from Rice and Bucknell to Wellesley and Scripps—find themselves repeatedly lauded online for their verdant quads, woodland trails, and historic appeal (businessinsider.com+1businessinsider.in+1.)

In short, private institutions appear to dominate these aesthetically driven rankings, cementing the message that investment in landscaping correlates with institutional reputation.

Beyond Curb Appeal: Grounds That Retain

Lore shows that beautiful campuses aren't

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mental floss for recruitment—their power lies in sustained student satisfaction:

- **Mental health support.** Access to calm restorative spaces—lakeside benches, meditation gardens—can alleviate stress and strengthen mental well-being, which research ties to higher student retention.
- **Pride and community.** Students frequently cite campus beauty as a source of pride—the backdrop for graduation selfies, morning jogs, and late-night strolls.
- **Outdoor classrooms.** Flora-rich learning zones act as living laboratories for science, art installations, and community programming—boosting student engagement and satisfaction.

Innovations on the Horizon

Looking ahead, private campuses are introducing cutting-edge landscaping features:

- **Smart gardens.** Automated sensors monitor soil moisture and instruct

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- **Multi functional green corridors.** Pathways with bike lanes, Wi-Fi-equipped study zones, and autopilot lighting offer versatility for students, faculty, and campus wellness initiatives.
- **Climate-resilient planting.** UK trends like cottage-style, blousy blooms and soft native grasses are crossing over, helping campuses adapt to “edge-of-change” plant varieties and wildlife friendly patches (businessinsider.com/homebuilding.co.uk+1bhg.com+1.)
- **Art–nature integration.** Installations—sculptures emerging from forestry, hidden alcoves beneath pergolas—turn grounds into interactive exhibits themselves.

Strategic Investment: Why Grounds Matter

In today’s competitive higher ed environment, campuses pull out all stops to stand apart.

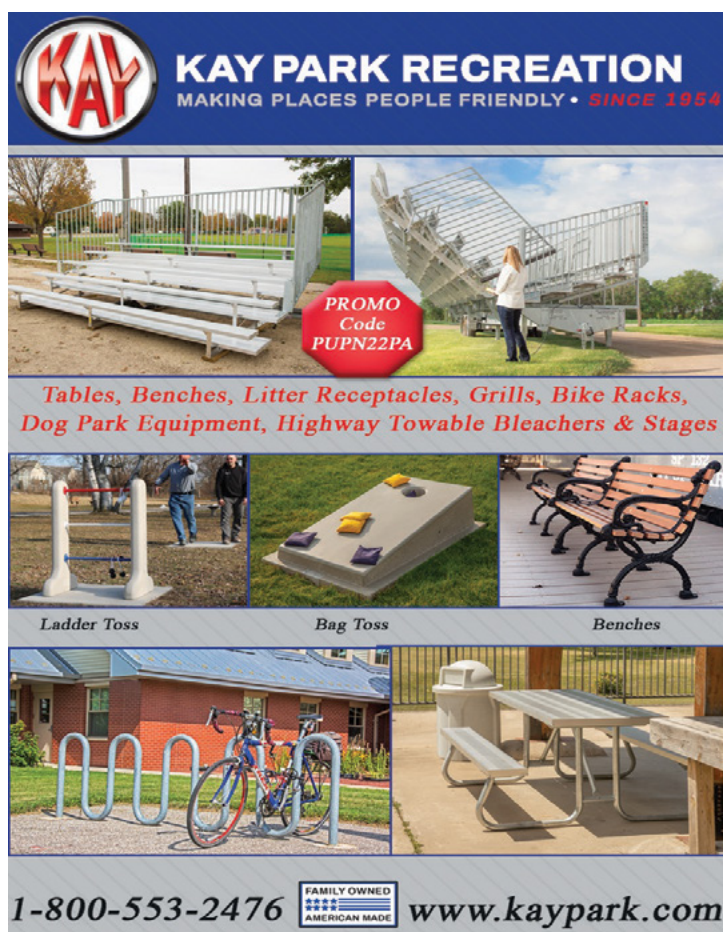
- **Differentiation.** While academic offerings can be replicated, a sense of place is unique—and beautiful grounds are hard to mimic.
- **Return on investment.** Landscaping improvements not only uplift brand perception but drive enrollment and retention—yielding dividends over decades.
- **Institutional legacy.** Many campuses tie their emblematic trees or gardens to donor legacies, campus history, or environmental missions, locking beauty into their identity.

Today’s private colleges are demonstrating that beauty is more than surface—it’s a transformative instrument of recruitment, retention, brand building, well being, and sustainability. With native plantings, arboreta, meditation gardens, and integrated art landscapes,

campuses are thoughtfully sculpted to offer sanctuary amid structure, inviting students to linger, learn, and call these spaces home.

As landscaping trends evolve, expectations will rise. The institutions that lead in aesthetics, green strategy, and wellness-first designs are not just building campuses—they’re crafting thriving, vibrant communities attuned to the aspirations of the modern student.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He worked on the staff at Mount Union College.



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According to Sean Farrell, senior project manager at Layton Construction, establishing collaborative relationships is key to successful construction projects. One of the best examples of this maxim is a multi-phase university project for which Layton Construction is serving as construction manager. Layton, part of the STO Building Group, is a nationally-ranked commercial contractor with ten offices around the United States. The firm specializes in healthcare, industrial, warehousing, and higher education projects. As construction manager, Layton hires the sub-contractors and manages and oversees the project as part of a team.



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— Sean Farrell, Sr Project Manager
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Hope's Brian Whalen, Vice President of Sales, acknowledges that the project was a real test of Hope's capabilities. He is especially proud that they Hope's was able to expedite the schedule even in the face of design changes and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The shop drawing approval process – including preparation of blueprints of windows and doors with all setting conditions, sizes, customized designs, and required testing – took longer than normal. Changes were made along the way that might have pushed back the delivery schedules for some, but Hope's made adjustments during the production process to deliver all materials on time. Whalen gave a nod to Joey Riggan and the team at Alexander Metals, the frame and glass installer team, saying the overall project went extremely smoothly once the frames were on site.

Says Whalen, “It was a fantastic collaboration among all the parties. Hope's worked closely as the manufacturer to fulfill the architect's design vision, and then the installer worked closely with us to make sure everything was installed executed properly.”



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