In this special section, we're shining a spotlight on an area that often gets overlooked when we talk about sustainability on campus: the furniture we invest in for our residence halls, common areas, and throughout campus.

Quality, value and aesthetics are, of course, paramount—but what about the often-unseen factors when it comes to furniture? The sustainability of the materials used, durability of the pieces chosen, the supplier's sourcing and manufacturing practices, and even the distance furniture travels after you order it all matter when it comes to furniture that supports your sustainability goals.

Even if students, parents, visitors and other stakeholders don't notice on their own the efforts you've taken to buy green when it comes to furniture, colleges and universities can share these details as selling points and to reinforce their commitment to a healthier environment.

Private institutions are uniquely positioned to lead the way. With a focus on holistic campus experiences, they are setting examples of how modern facilities can be beautiful, functional, and sustainable all at once—down to the desks, chairs, sofas, and beds they invest in. Keep reading to learn what to look for when it comes to identifying furniture that aligns with your sustainability goals.

What are the Choices for "Sustainable" Furniture in Higher Education Residence Halls and Common Areas?

For me, "green" has been a word thrown around since I first started my career in furniture manufacturing nearly 20 years ago. Even at that point in the mid-2000's, it wasn't a new concept. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, and since that time, concern and awareness of and for our planet has certainly grown and become more of a mainstream focus. And for good reason - smart utilization of our finite resources and stewardship of our environment is important since we only have one planet.

So, when it comes to furniture for large housing projects (college and university housing, specifically), how can we make

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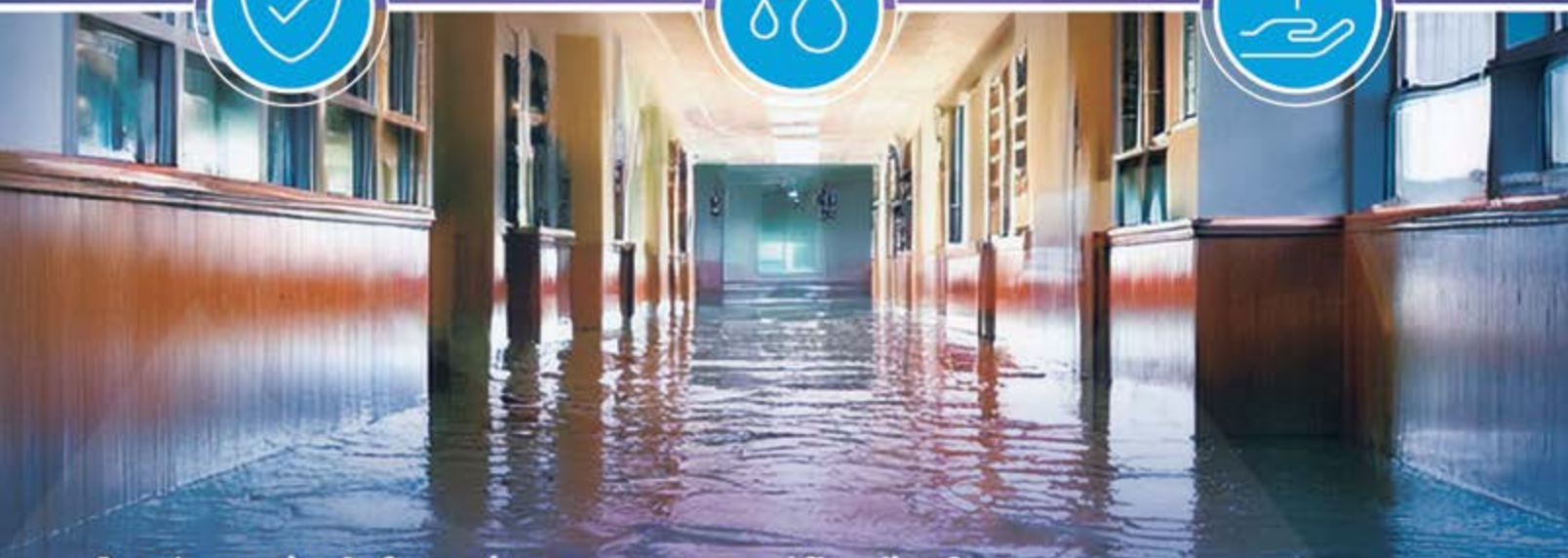

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sure we are making the best choices for the sustainability of our planet? As with anything, there are a lot of moving parts, many factors to consider, and choices to make, but the good news is that there ARE choices. Awareness and concern are a great first step in choosing green, but understanding the key aspects of how your furniture is manufactured in an environmentally conscious manner is a critical next step in making the best of those choices for your next big project.

Material Selection

The two main choices for the components of furniture are wood and metal. When comparing the two, wood is considered the more environmentally friendly option. Metal furniture is often made from finite resources and requires more extensive processing, which can have a higher environmental impact – especially metal coming from other countries that might not have the same environmental regulations and concerns. Metal furniture is recyclable, but that process is often not taken advantage of and is energy intensive as well.

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Wood, however, is a renewable resource, and its production has a lower carbon footprint compared to metal. The type of wood product is also critical in furniture selection – and there are several to choose from. In simple terms there are particleboard (usually faced with laminate), plywood, and solid wood. Each may have their advantages and disadvantages depending on how the furniture is intended to be used, but from a purely "green" standpoint, plywood is often the best choice.

Particleboard is an engineered wood product that is manufactured from wood chips and a synthetic resin or glue. This can come in many "grades" and forms, but regardless of the grade, it is generally more energy intensive to make and can have further negative impacts depending on the resins used.

Plywood is defined as an engineered wood product made from thin layers of wood veneer, known as plies, that are glued together. The grain of the layers is typically arranged at right angles to each other for added strength. The use of veneer core plywood in place of solid wood and particleboard minimizes the effect on the environment by providing a more complete use of the harvested tree. Trees used for veneer application extends the utilization by as much as 16 times more than solid applications.

Solid wood construction, as the name implies, is made from solid lumber—a natural resource that is cut down into manageable pieces and often glued back together for long-term durability, improvement of appearance, and long-term environmental stability. As stated above in contrast to plywood, it's not as efficient from the use of the entire tree but is a very durable option that can be re-finished many times, so has some environmental benefits from that standpoint.

Regardless of the type of wood product used, it's important to use wood suppliers who select lumber that implements environmentally supported harvesting controls. There are industry certifications such as SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), that are in place to ensure these practices – and it is key to purchase furniture from companies that source from certified suppliers. For plywood and particleboard, it's key to use materials that contain no added formaldehyde.

Finishing

Once the product is constructed, the finishing of the product is equally important in regard to the environment. For wood or metal product, selecting finishes that reduce the overall off-gassing and catalyzing in the application of the finish material are key.

In the metal furniture world, the most common finish and best choice from an environmental aspect would be to choose a powder coated finish. The powder coating process involves applying a dry powder to a surface, which is then cured under heat to create a durable and attractive finish. It is considered environmentally friendly due to

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For commercial wood finishes, the optimal choice for the environment is an ultraviolet (UV) finishing system. As the name implies, UV finishing cures the finish materials with ultraviolet light as opposed to a chemical catalyst (where you get the finish "smell"). The UV system provides a material transfer rate from application to finished product in excess of 99%. Not only does this process not produce any substantial VOCs, but it is also extremely durable and long-lasting.

Transportation

How the furniture gets to its final location is another major consideration in the sustainability story – both before and after its construction.

Prior to the being built, getting materials from local sources requires less energy and environmental resources than obtaining similar or alternative materials from halfway around the globe.

Likewise, shipping the finished goods from a manufacturer that is close to the final project location is a more sustainable option than coming over long distances. In the instance that furniture does have to come from a longer distance (we live in a big country), utilizing a transportation method that has a lower environmental impact such as rail is a better option. Just keep in mind during the planning process that many times rail transportation can increase the time that it takes to get to the final location. This is an easy obstacle to overcome if considered during the planning process.

Waste

It would be neglectful to talk about sustainability in furniture manufacturing without talking about waste. There are many important areas to address the waste issue in manufacturing environments, some of which have been slightly discussed regarding materials and finishing, but going further than this, we can look at a few key areas.

Waste streams such as used oils, cleaning fluids and some finishing materials can and should be recycled to minimize waste. Fuel oil processing and heating systems within the manufacturing location itself should utilize efficient systems, reducing oil consumption and the release of airborne contaminants.

Another aspect of waste is the material that is wasted in the manufacturing of the product itself. Key areas here would be to recycle unused product and offcuts whether in other products/components, such as corner blocks in upholstered furniture or recycled in the form of wood mulch or utilized in heating systems (pelletized fuel) or bedding for local farmers and their animals.

Minimizing packaging materials is a key component of waste as well. Each year, millions of trees are harvested to provide packaging for shipments. Partnering with

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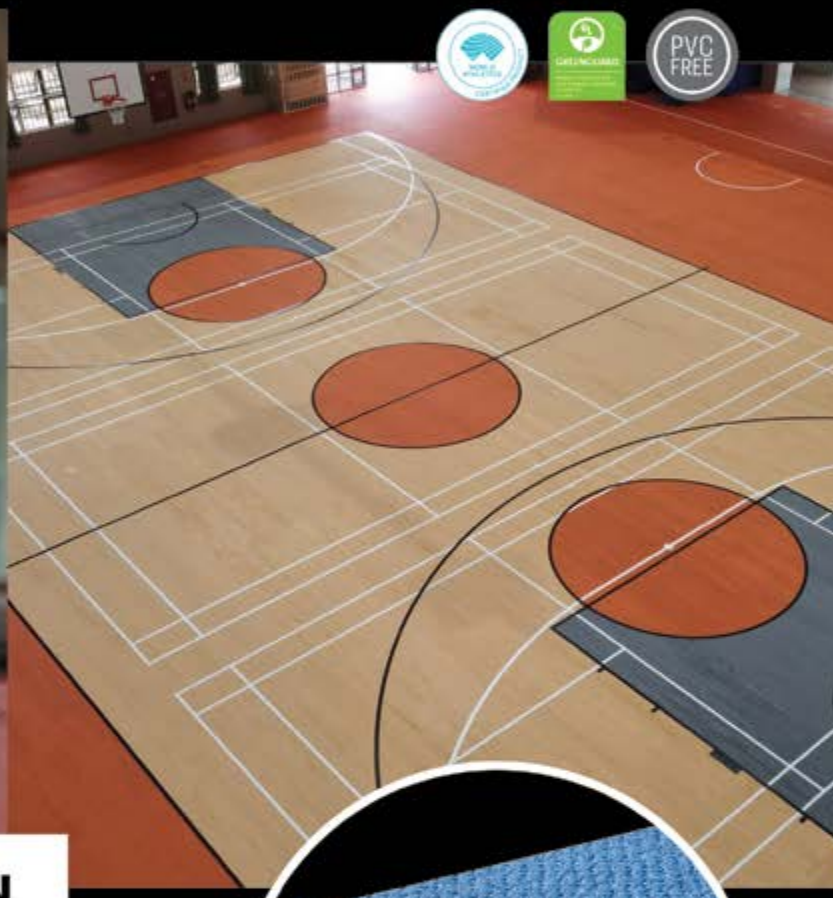

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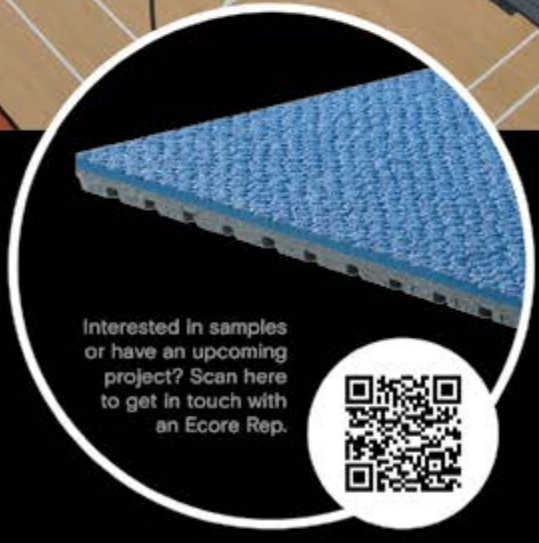

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a company that uses minimal packing and shipping materials (pallets, cardboard, etc.) goes a long way in minimizing waste in a large-scale furniture project.

Longevity/Lifecycle

An often-overlooked aspect of sustainability in furniture is the overall design of the product regarding longevity. The mindset in our society can often be to "throw it away and get something new". While not only an expensive long-term option, it's also not environmentally friendly. The same is very true for institutional furniture.

Purchasing a building full of furniture that will have to be replaced in five to 10 years has literally twice the negative environmental impact (or more) than furniture that will last 15 to 20 years. Thus, selecting furniture that has an expected life cycle of 20 years or more is a very smart environmental (as well as fiscal) choice.

Furniture design can also play a major part in this as well. Selecting pieces that are not only designed to hold up well (with a clean, timeless look), but have components that are easily replaceable without the need to swap an entire piece (or building) of furniture goes a long way. Think drawer fronts that are easily swapped if damaged, arms and seats of upholstered furniture that can be re-upholstered instead of replacing the entire unit. All are smart choices.

It goes without saying that the world of "green" and "sustainability" is deeper and more nuanced that we can get into in one article, but choosing to partner with a furniture supplier that cares about these factors is a step in the right direction for creating a sustainable future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lucas Fanning has over 12 years of experience in contract furniture manufacturing as well as over 6 years of experience in higher education. He is currently the Sales & Marketing Manager at Savoy Contract Furniture, where he has worked for over 5 years.

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