



Flooring a Campus with Purpose

HOW STRATEGIC FLOORING CHOICES SUPPORT FUNCTION, SUSTAINABILITY, AND CAMPUS LIFE

BY ED BAUER

The flooring choices a college or university makes shape the daily experience of students, faculty, staff, and visitors, but the broader implications often go unconsidered. Flooring quietly influences how spaces function, how buildings age, how sustainable a campus truly is—and how students, faculty, and visitors feel while moving through it all. From historic academic halls and bustling residence buildings to laboratories, dining spaces, and recreation centers, each campus building places unique demands on its floors.

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Selecting the right flooring across a multi-building campus isn't about choosing a single material; it's about understanding how use, durability, sustainability, and design intersect.

For facilities leaders, flooring decisions carry long-term implications. The wrong choices can result in frequent repairs, safety concerns, or missed sustainability goals—while better choices can support institutional branding, contribute to LEED certification, and even play a role in student attraction and retention.

One Campus, Many Flooring Needs

Unlike single-use facilities, private university campuses are complex ecosystems. Each building type has distinct traffic patterns, acoustic needs, maintenance demands, and aesthetic goals. A successful flooring strategy starts by matching materials to purpose.

Academic Buildings and Classrooms. Academic buildings experience constant foot traffic throughout the day, often with students carrying heavy backpacks and equipment. In classrooms and lecture halls, durability and acoustics are top priorities. Carpet tile remains a popular choice, offering sound absorption that reduces noise transfer between classrooms while allowing for easy replacement of damaged sections. Many institutions opt for modular carpet systems with recycled content and low-VOC adhesives, supporting sustainability goals without sacrificing performance.

In corridors and high-traffic common areas, luxury vinyl tile (LVT) and polished concrete have gained traction. LVT offers the appearance of wood or stone while standing up to heavy use and requiring minimal maintenance. Polished concrete, often used in modern academic buildings or renovated industrial spaces, provides exceptional durability and a contemporary aesthetic, while eliminating the need for additional floor coverings.

Administrative and Office Spaces. Administrative buildings benefit from flooring that balances professionalism with comfort. Broadloom carpet or carpet tile remains common in offices and conference rooms due to its acoustic benefits and underfoot comfort. Facilities teams increasingly select carpet products with cradle-to-cradle certifications, recycled backing, and take-back programs, ensuring the material's end-of-life is considered from the start.

In shared spaces such as lobbies and reception areas, stone-look porcelain tile or terrazzo delivers durability and a strong first impression. These materials also align well with institutions looking to reinforce a sense of permanence and quality.

Residence Halls. Residence halls present one of the most challenging flooring environments on campus. Floors must withstand heavy foot traffic, frequent move-ins and move-outs, spills, and furniture movement—all while feeling comfortable and welcoming to students.

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Carpet tile is frequently used in student rooms and hallways, offering warmth, sound absorption, and easy replacement. Many campuses now specify solution-dyed fibers, which are more stain-resistant and maintain appearance over time. In suite-style residences and bathrooms, LVT and sheet vinyl are preferred for moisture resistance and ease of cleaning.

An example can be seen at a Midwestern private university that recently renovated three residence halls, replacing aging broadloom carpet with modular carpet tile made from recycled fishing nets. The upgrade reduced maintenance costs, improved indoor air quality, and supported the institution's broader sustainability commitments.

Dining Facilities and Student Centers. Dining halls and student unions demand flooring that handles spills, rolling equipment, and constant traffic. Safety is paramount,

making slip resistance a key specification. Quarry tile, porcelain tile, and textured LVT are commonly used in food service areas, while polished concrete and terrazzo remain popular in seating and gathering spaces.

Beyond function, these buildings often serve as social hubs—and flooring can subtly reinforce school branding. Custom color palettes, logo inlays, or patterned designs help spaces feel distinctly “on brand” without overwhelming the design.

Laboratories, Libraries, and Specialized Spaces

Laboratories and Research Facilities. Labs require flooring that prioritizes safety, chemical resistance, and ease of sanitation. Seamless sheet vinyl, rubber flooring, and epoxy systems are frequently specified due to their ability to withstand spills and aggressive cleaning protocols. These materials

also support infection control, an increasingly important consideration in research environments.

Libraries and Study Spaces. Libraries demand quiet. Carpet tile and cork flooring are often used to reduce noise while providing comfort for long study sessions. Cork has gained interest for its renewable properties, resilience, and warm aesthetic, making it a smart option for institutions prioritizing sustainability and wellness.

Sustainable Flooring and the LEED Advantage

Sustainability is no longer a “nice-to-have” in campus design—it’s an expectation. Flooring plays a measurable role in achieving LEED certification and advancing institutional environmental goals.

Many flooring products now contribute points in multiple LEED categories, including:

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- **Materials and Resources (MR):** Products with recycled content, regional sourcing, and Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs).
- **Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ):** Low-VOC materials and adhesives that improve indoor air quality.
- **Life-Cycle Impact Reduction:** Durable materials with long lifespans and manufacturer take-back programs.

For example, a private university in the Northeast incorporated linoleum flooring—made from natural, renewable materials—into a new academic building. The flooring choice supported LEED Gold certification while aligning with the institution's commitment to transparency and environmental stewardship.

Installation Examples: Real-World Lessons

Across the country, campuses are leveraging

flooring upgrades as part of broader renovation and modernization efforts.

- A Southern private university replaced dated vinyl composition tile (VCT) in academic corridors with LVT, reducing annual maintenance costs by eliminating stripping and waxing.
- A West Coast institution used polished concrete throughout a new engineering building, combining durability with a modern aesthetic and lowering long-term operational expenses.
- A historic campus in the Midwest selected wool-blend carpet tiles for a renovated library, balancing sustainability, acoustics, and respect for the building's original character.

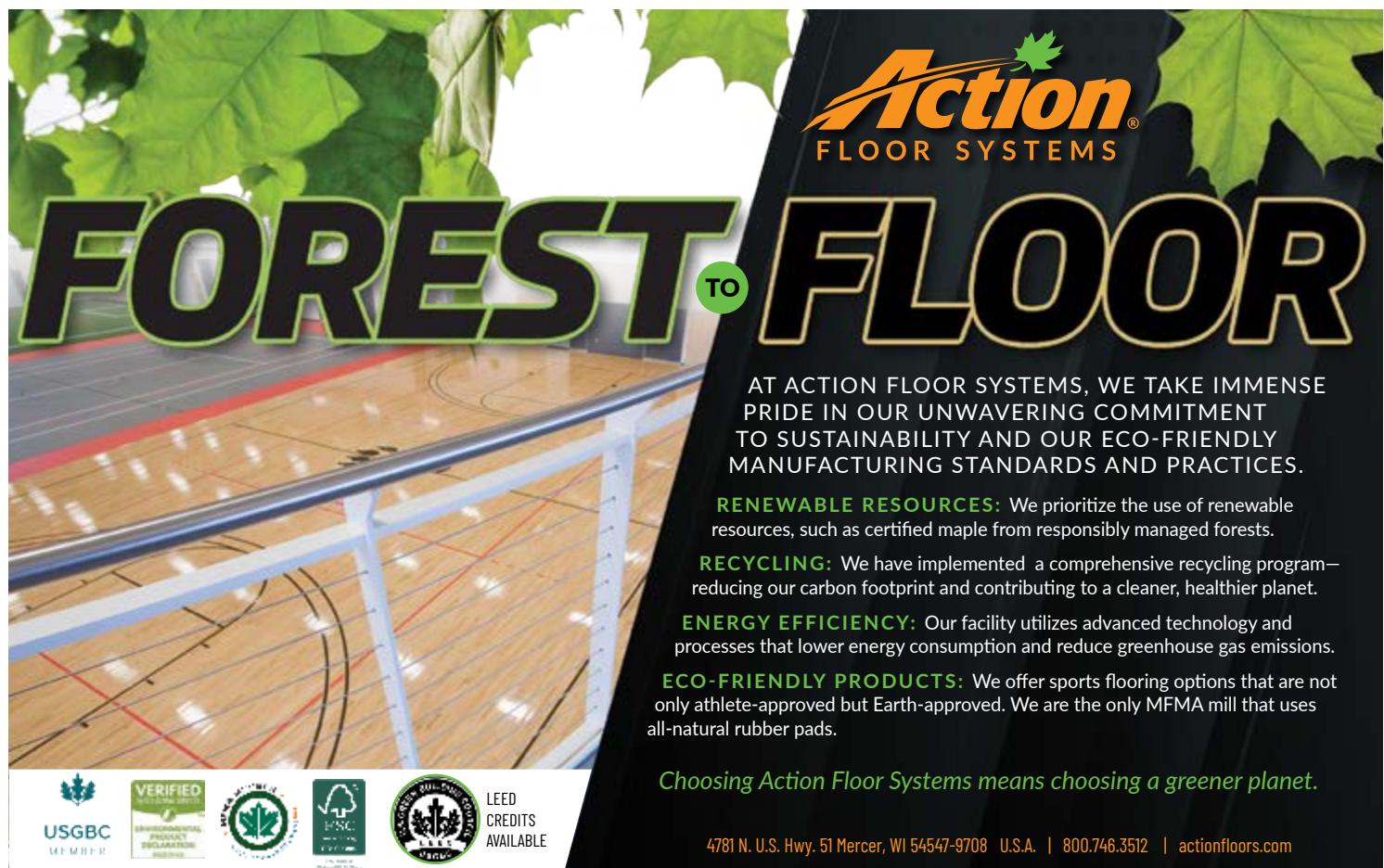
These examples highlight a common theme: flooring decisions are most successful when facilities teams consider life-cycle cost, maintenance capacity, and campus identity together.

Flooring as a Strategic Campus Investment

Flooring may not always grab headlines, but its impact is undeniable. When thoughtfully selected, flooring supports safety, sustainability, branding, and long-term operational efficiency across campus. For private universities navigating tight budgets and rising expectations, flooring decisions represent an opportunity to invest wisely—creating spaces that work harder, last longer, and reflect the values of the institution they serve.

In the end, the most successful campuses are those that understand every surface tells a story—starting from the ground up.

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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