



FACILITIES &
MAINTENANCE

Green Maintenance: Building a Sustainable Standard Across Private College Campuses

BY DAVID VINSON, PH.D.

Sustainability on private college campuses has evolved well beyond a focus on green building projects and LEED-certified facilities. Today, the conversation has shifted toward how campuses are maintained day in and day out. Green maintenance is no longer a niche initiative—it is an operational philosophy that impacts everything from custodial routines to waste-management strategies.

For facility managers and campus leaders, embracing sustainable maintenance practices offers measurable benefits in cost savings, student engagement, and long-term asset preservation.

At its core, green maintenance is about making smarter choices with the resources already in use. It is less about sweeping change and more about consistent, intentional decisions that add up over time.

The Benefits of Green Maintenance

One of the most immediate advantages of green maintenance is cost efficiency. While some sustainable products or systems may carry a slightly higher upfront cost, they often result in lower lifecycle expenses. Concentrated cleaning products reduce shipping and storage costs. Energy-efficient equipment lowers utility bills. Preventative

maintenance strategies extend the life of flooring, fixtures, and mechanical systems, reducing replacement frequency.

Beyond financial benefits, green maintenance contributes significantly to indoor environmental quality. Improved air quality, reduced chemical exposure, and cleaner living and learning spaces directly impact student and staff well-being. This is especially critical in residence halls, classrooms, and athletic facilities where high occupancy can quickly amplify poor environmental conditions.

There's also a reputational advantage. Prospective students and their families increasingly consider sustainability when evaluating institutions. A campus that demonstrates a visible commitment to environmentally responsible practices sends a powerful message about its values and forward-thinking leadership.

Finally, green maintenance supports institutional sustainability goals. Many private colleges have established climate commitments or carbon reduction targets. Maintenance operations play a critical role in achieving those benchmarks, particularly when it comes to waste reduction, water conservation, and energy use.

Rethinking Recycling Programs

Recycling is often the most visible component of a campus sustainability effort, but its effectiveness depends heavily on execution. A well-designed recycling program goes beyond placing bins in convenient locations—it requires education, consistency, and ongoing evaluation.

Successful programs begin with clear, standardized signage. Confusion about what can and cannot be recycled leads to contamination, which can render entire batches of recyclables unusable. Campuses should prioritize simple, visually consistent messaging across all buildings, using color coding and imagery to guide users quickly.

Equally important is bin placement. Recycling containers should always be paired

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with trash bins to encourage proper sorting. High-traffic areas such as dining halls, student unions, and residence halls should receive particular attention, as these spaces generate the highest volume of waste.

Education plays a critical role in maintaining program integrity. Orientation sessions, campus campaigns, and digital communications can reinforce proper recycling habits. Involving student organizations in sustainability initiatives not only improves participation but also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability.

Data tracking is another essential component. Monitoring waste streams allows facility teams to identify trends, address problem areas, and measure progress. For example, if contamination rates are high in a particular building, targeted education or improved signage may be necessary.

Some campuses are expanding beyond traditional recycling into composting programs, particularly in dining services. Food waste

diversion not only reduces landfill contributions but can also support campus landscaping efforts when compost is reused on-site.

Sustainable Cleaning Regimens

Cleaning practices are at the heart of maintenance operations, and they offer one of the most impactful opportunities for sustainability improvements. Transitioning to green cleaning regimens does not mean sacrificing effectiveness—in fact, many environmentally friendly products perform just as well, if not better, than their traditional counterparts.

A key strategy is the use of certified green cleaning products that minimize harmful chemicals. These products reduce indoor air pollution and create safer environments for both occupants and custodial staff. Additionally, switching to concentrated solutions and dilution control systems helps minimize waste and ensure consistent application.

Equipment upgrades can also make a significant difference. High-efficiency vacuum cleaners with HEPA filtration improve air

quality by capturing fine particles, while microfiber cleaning systems reduce the need for chemical cleaners and water usage. Automatic floor scrubbers with water-saving technology further enhance efficiency, particularly in large facilities such as recreation centers and academic buildings.

Daytime cleaning programs are another growing trend on college campuses. By shifting certain cleaning activities to daytime hours, institutions can reduce energy usage associated with lighting and HVAC systems. This approach also increases visibility, allowing occupants to see sustainability efforts in action and fostering a culture of shared responsibility.

Training is essential to the success of any green cleaning initiative. Custodial staff should be equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to implement sustainable practices effectively. Ongoing education ensures that protocols are followed consistently and that new technologies or products are integrated smoothly.

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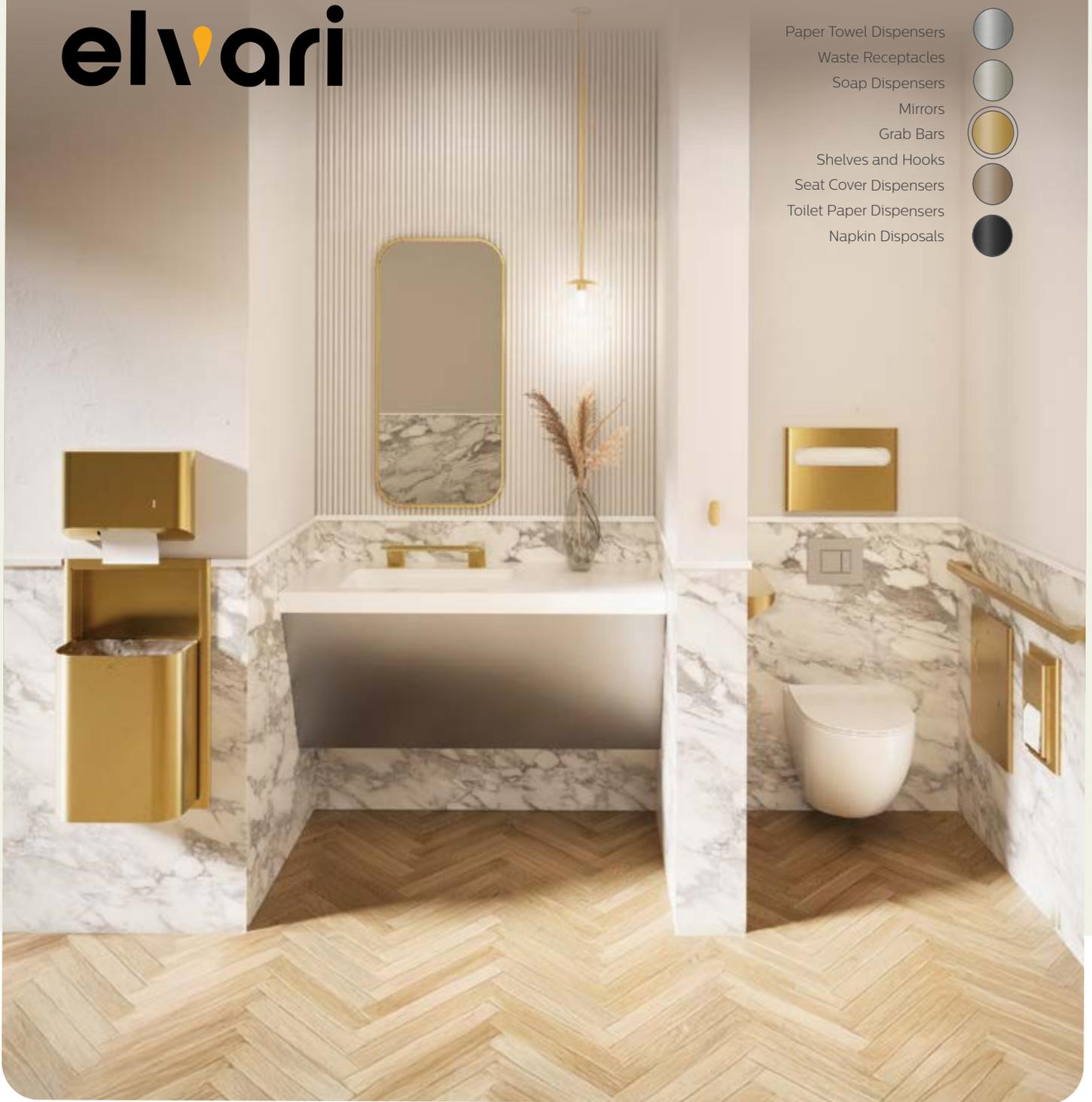
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Integrating Maintenance with Campus Culture

Green maintenance is most effective when it is integrated into the broader campus culture rather than treated as a standalone initiative. Collaboration between facilities teams, administration, faculty, and students is key to creating lasting change.

Transparency can help drive engagement. Sharing sustainability metrics—such as waste diversion rates, water savings, or reductions in chemical use—demonstrates progress and reinforces the value of these efforts. Celebrating milestones and recognizing contributions from various campus groups can further strengthen participation.

Pilot programs are an effective way to introduce new initiatives without overwhelming resources. For example, testing a composting program in one dining hall or implementing green cleaning practices in a single residence hall allows teams to refine processes before scaling up campus wide.

Technology can also play a role in advancing green maintenance. Smart building systems, occupancy sensors, and data analytics tools provide valuable insights that can inform maintenance strategies and optimize resource use.

Looking Ahead

As sustainability expectations continue to rise, green maintenance will become an increasingly important differentiator for private colleges and universities. Institutions that prioritize sustainable operations today are better positioned to meet future regulatory requirements, attract environmentally conscious students, and manage costs effectively.

The shift toward green maintenance does not require a complete overhaul of existing systems. Instead, it is a continuous process of improvement—evaluating current practices, identifying opportunities for enhancement, and implementing changes that align with institutional goals.

In many ways, green maintenance reflects the broader mission of higher education: thoughtful stewardship, long-term planning, and a commitment to creating environments where people can thrive. By embracing sustainable maintenance practices, private college campuses can lead by example, demonstrating that even the smallest operational changes can have a meaningful impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: David Vinson, PUPN staff writer, has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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