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What to Prioritize When Choosing High Performance Campus Mowers

BY GRASSHOPPER MOWERS

For private colleges and universities, the appearance of the campus is often the first impression prospective students, parents, alumni, and visitors have of the institution. Maintaining beautifully manicured lawns, athletic fields, and landscaped gathering spaces requires more than a skilled grounds crew—it requires selecting equipment that delivers productivity, reliability, and exceptional cut quality across a wide range of terrain.

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To help facilities and grounds professionals make informed equipment decisions, PUPN sat down with Brent Dobson, Government & National Fleet Accounts Manager at Grasshopper Mowers, to discuss the key factors universities should consider when investing in commercial mowing equipment. From choosing the right mower configuration and power source to evaluating long-term operating costs, operator comfort, and year-round versatility, Dobson shares practical insights drawn from decades of experience working with institutional grounds managers across the country.

Whether your campus is replacing a single mower or planning an entire fleet upgrade, Dobson offers expert guidance to help maximize productivity, protect turf quality, and achieve the lowest total cost of ownership while maintaining the professional appearance today's campuses demand.

PUPN: What impact does varying turf and terrain have on selecting a mower?

Dobson: A university campus is not one property—it's a dozen different mowing environments sharing a map. Manicured quad lawns that define the institution's first impression sit next to athletic fields with their own turf-health standards, ornamental beds that demand tight, careful trimming, retention-pond banks and hillsides that test stability, and rough perimeter areas where durability matters more than finish. Add tight spaces around walkways, bike racks, benches, and landscaping, and it becomes clear that no single machine configuration is ideal for everything. The right question isn't "which mower?" but "which mix of mowers, and which configuration for each job?"

This is where deck position and machine type matter. Grasshopper builds three configurations, each suited to different parts of the campus:

- **MidMount zero-turns** put the deck between the axles for a compact footprint and nimble handling—ideal for open lawns, athletic fields, and areas where you want maximum acreage per hour with a tight turning radius. The 400D MidMount, for example, can mow up to 7.2 acres per hour.
- **FrontMount zero-turns** carry the deck out ahead of the operator, so it reaches under low branches, shrubs, fence lines, and playground or bleacher edges that a mid-deck can't. The out-front deck also follows ground contours well, which helps on undulating turf and around ornamental areas. FrontMount is also the platform that unlocks year-round attachments (see Q7).
- **Stand-On mowers** shine in tight, gated, or obstacle-dense spaces—courtyards, areas with frequent on-and-off for gates or debris, and trailering-heavy routes—where a compact, highly maneuverable platform saves time.

The practical takeaway for a grounds director: match the machine to the terrain rather than forcing one machine to do everything. Many campuses run a MidMount or two for

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open acreage, a FrontMount for contoured and hard-to-reach areas plus off-season versatility, and a Stand-On for tight zones. Slopes and rough terrain also argue for a low center of gravity and stable, wide stance—both Grasshopper design priorities—and for talking through your specific slope conditions with a dealer before buying.

PUPN: What power source best fits a campus' operational goals?

Dobson: Power source is one of the most consequential—and most overlooked—decisions in a campus mower purchase, because it touches fuel cost, noise, maintenance, and even where and when crews can mow. Grasshopper offers gas (including EFI—electronic fuel injection—for better fuel economy and easier starting) and diesel across much of the lineup, so the decision can be made on operational goals rather than on what's available.

For universities, diesel deserves a serious look. Grasshopper offers Kubota Clean Diesel engines across MidMount (e.g., 325D, 400D), FrontMount (e.g., 700 and 900 Series), and Stand-On models. The case for diesel on a campus:

- **Fuel efficiency and cost per hour.** Diesel engines typically deliver more work per gallon and hold up well under the sustained, high-load mowing a large campus demands, which improves cost per acre over a long season.
- **Longevity and duty cycle.** Diesel engines are built for long service life under heavy, continuous use—a good match for institutional fleets that run daily through the growing season for years.
- **Torque for tough conditions.** Diesel's low-end torque handles tall, wet, or heavy growth and slopes without bogging down.

It's also critical to consider the noise factor. Noise is a campus-specific consideration that's easy to overlook. Grounds crews often have to mow around active classrooms, dorms with sleeping students, libraries, exam periods, outdoor events, and early-morning windows before foot traffic picks up. Sound level affects when and where you're allowed to run equipment.

Quieter operation widens the daily mowing window and reduces complaints. Ask your dealer about sound levels for the specific engine and configuration you're considering and weigh EFI gas and diesel options on noise as well as fuel cost.

The bottom line: choose power source based on total operating cost, your daily noise constraints, and duty cycle—not sticker price alone. Grasshopper's breadth of gas, EFI, and diesel options means a campus can standardize



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on the power source that fits its goals.

PUPN: How well does the mower protect turf quality and campus appearance?

Dobson: For a private university, the grounds are the brand. Prospective students and their families form an impression in the first 90 seconds of a campus visit, and well-kept lawns signal an institution that pays attention to detail. A cut that looks merely “fine”—with streaking, scalping, clumping, or uneven stripes—quietly undercuts that message. This is not a place to settle.

Cut quality comes down to deck engineering, and it's a genuine Grasshopper differentiator. The DuraMax all-steel decks are the product of years of airflow research: extra-deep 5.5-inch cutting chambers create the airflow that lifts grass to stand tall before it's cut, producing a cleaner, more even finish and better clipping dispersal or collection. Better airflow is the difference between a lawn

that looks professionally maintained and one that looks merely mowed.

Turf protection matters as much as appearance, especially on athletic fields and irrigated show lawns. Points worth making:

- Zero-turn maneuverability means fewer passes, less overlap, and cleaner lines around obstacles—less repeated wheel traffic on the same turf.
- Consistent deck performance across varied conditions (dry, damp, tall) keeps quality uniform so the whole campus looks intentional, not patchy.
- The ability to switch cutting modes—standard side-discharge, mulching, or collection—lets crews choose the approach that keeps a given area healthiest and cleanest (see Q7).

The mower deck is the single biggest driver of how the finished campus looks. Investing in a deck engineered for cut quality protects

the institution's most visible asset.

PUPN: What is the total cost of ownership and expected return on investment?

Dobson: The purchase price is the number everyone sees, but it's rarely the number that matters most. Total cost of ownership (TCO) over a machine's working life includes fuel or electricity, routine maintenance and labor, replacement parts, downtime, depreciation, and resale value. A mower that costs less up front but burns more fuel, needs more service hours, or spends more days out of commission can easily cost more over five to 10 years.

It's wise to build a simple cost-per-hour or cost-per-acre model rather than comparing sticker prices.

Where Grasshopper strengthens the TCO and ROI case:

- **Productivity (the biggest ROI lever).** Faster, wider, more efficient mowing means fewer labor hours to cover the

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same acreage—and on most campuses, labor is the largest line item in grounds budgets. Machines like the 400D MidMount and 900D FrontMount mowing up to 7.2 acres per hour directly reduce the hours needed to keep the campus cut.

- **Fuel efficiency.** Diesel and EFI options lower fuel cost per acre over a long season (see Q2).
- **Lower maintenance burden.** Grasshopper designed for serviceability: MidMount models have only five lubrication points and FrontMount models fewer than ten, cutting the time and labor spent on routine upkeep. Fewer service hours mean lower cost and more uptime.
- **Durability and long service life.** Heavy-gauge formed-steel decks and robust commercial engines are built to stay in service for years, spreading the purchase price over more mowing seasons and supporting resale value.
- **Versatility as an ROI multiplier.** A FrontMount that plows snow, sweeps, and collects leaves in the off-season earns its keep year-round instead of sitting idle (see Q7).

The bottom line: Evaluate mowers on cost per acre over the full lifespan and on the labor hours they save—not on purchase price. On those terms, a productive, fuel-efficient, low-maintenance, durable machine often wins clearly even at a higher initial cost.

PUPN: What safety and operator comfort features are included?

Dobson: Crew safety and comfort aren't soft benefits—they're productivity and retention issues. A comfortable operator mows longer with better focus and fewer errors, and reducing fatigue and vibration lowers the risk of strain injuries over a long season. On a campus full of students, pedestrians, and events, safety is also about protecting people around the machine.

Grasshopper's operator-focused features give the writer concrete, specific points:

- **Suspension seating that fights fatigue.** Premier suspension seats offer adjustable lumbar support, ventilated (front-to-rear airflow) cushions to keep operators cool, and suspension tuned across a wide weight range (roughly 100–375 lbs) so the seat fits the operator, not the other way around.
- **Vibration and shock control.** A low center of gravity plus integrated multi-point suspension dissipates the jolts of uneven ground, and an iso-mounted, shock-absorbing footrest adds legroom while reducing knee and leg fatigue.
- **Adjustable, accessible controls.** QuikAdjust tilt levers let operators customize their reach over a 9-inch range to reduce strain, with "Tall Boy" control levers available for taller operators—a real benefit when multiple crew members share the same machine.
- **Built-in safety.** A retractable seat belt with an interlock switch is part of the operator station, and the low center of gravity supports stability on the slopes and banks common on campuses.

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Ergonomics keep crews healthy and productive across a full mowing season, and a well-designed operator station is an investment in the people who maintain the campus—not just the machine.

PUPN: How reliable is the equipment, and what dealer support is available?

Dobson: For an institution, downtime during peak growing season isn't just inconvenient—it means a visibly unkempt campus and crews idled or pulled onto slower backup equipment. Two things determine whether that happens: how reliably the machine holds up, and how fast the dealer gets you running again when service is needed.

1. Optimizing reliability and serviceability:

- **Built for commercial duty.** Heavy-gauge, robotically welded formed-steel decks (spindles anchored in a six-bolt

pattern to spread impact force) and commercial Kubota, Rehlko/Kohler, Vanguard, and Kawasaki engines are engineered to hold up under daily institutional use.

- **Designed to be easy to maintain.** Few lubrication points (five on MidMount, fewer than ten on FrontMount), a standard PowerFold deck on FrontMount models that lifts for quick blade changes and underside cleaning, and easy engine access (raise the hood on liquid-cooled models; rear clutch access on horizontal-crankshaft engines). Easier maintenance means it actually gets done — and done faster — which drives reliability and uptime.

1. Choosing the right dealer—arguably the most important factor, and one buyers often give too little weight:

- **Quality dealers:** Grasshopper sells

exclusively through a worldwide network of vetted, independent dealers chosen for product knowledge and service capability. A knowledgeable local dealer is the difference between a same-week fix and a machine down for a month.

- **Commercial warranty:** Most Grasshopper products are backed for commercial use, with a three-year limited warranty—parts and labor in years one and two, parts only in year three.
- **Lower operating cost.** Grasshopper has competitive OEM parts and reduced service points compared to other brands, making maintenance simple and replacement parts affordable.

Before buying, evaluate the dealer as carefully as the machine. Ask about parts availability, typical service turnaround during

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peak season, loaner or priority options for institutional accounts, and the dealer's track record with other universities or large grounds operations nearby.

PUPN: Can the mower adapt to multiple campus maintenance needs?

Dobson: A mower that only mows sits idle for months of the year. On a campus with a tight equipment budget and limited storage, a machine that works across seasons delivers far more value and consolidates what crews have to buy, maintain, and store. This is one of the strongest arguments for choosing a platform built for versatility from the start.

Grasshopper's FrontMount platform is designed exactly for this, and it's the centerpiece of the answer:

- **QuikConverter implement system.** Grasshopper's exclusive QuikConverter lets crews swap the

mower deck for another attachment on any FrontMount power unit in minutes, with no tools and no alignment hassle—so the same machine changes jobs quickly instead of being a single-purpose mower.

- **Year-round attachments.** The FrontMount line supports a full range of implements: snowthrowers, V-plows, dozer blades, rotary brooms, and winter cab options for snow and ice work; plus leaf and debris handling and other implements. A machine that mows all summer can clear campus walkways and lots all winter.
- **Cutting-mode flexibility.** Grasshopper decks convert between standard side-discharge, down-discharge mulching, and PowerVac collection, so crews can mulch to feed the turf, bag for a manicured finish, or collect leaves in the fall—matching the method to the area and season.

The takeaway: Think of a mower purchase as a year-round equipment decision, not a summer one. Ask what attachments a platform supports, how quickly implements swap, and how many separate machines one versatile unit can replace. On a campus, a FrontMount that mows, mulches, collects, sweeps, and plows can do the work of several machines and justify its cost across all four seasons.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Founded in  Kansas, Grasshopper is a family-owned, innovation-driven manufacturer of American-made zero-turn mowers. Since introducing its first mower in 1969, the company has remained committed to engineering excellence, operator comfort, lasting performance, and dependable dealer support worldwide.

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