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How Universities can Specify Floors that Support Occupant Wellbeing and Align with Campus Sustainability Commitments

WHY MOBILE STAGING IS BECOMING AN ESSENTIAL PIECE OF CAMPUS EVENT INFRASTRUCTURE

BY TODD ALLISON

Higher education institutions have long led the way on sustainability, and today, that leadership is a genuine competitive advantage. According to The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey 2026, 62% of students say that having information on a college's sustainability goals and commitments would influence their decision to apply or attend. As universities advance more sustainable campuses, one foundational element offers an outsized opportunity to make a difference: the floor.

As one of the largest surfaces in any building, flooring can be a powerful lever for improving indoor air quality, infection control, and occupant well-being. Thoughtful flooring specification—from material selection and certifications to maintenance protocols and end-of-life landfill avoidance solutions—empowers university facility managers and designers to create high-performing campus buildings that contribute to the wellbeing of the people who learn, live, and work in them.

Indoor Air Quality

When designing buildings that contribute to occupant wellbeing, one of the first factors to consider is indoor air quality. Indoor air quality (IAQ) has a measurable impact on occupants, from mold exposure to asthma and allergy triggers. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, common asthma triggers include, among other things, dust mites, pollen, molds, pet dander, and airborne irritants. Sources of indoor air pollution can hide in plain sight: cleaning products, paint, building products, new furniture and new carpet (which can off-gas fumes), and more. Specifying floors that support good IAQ includes prioritizing responsible materials, sustainable maintenance, and moisture management.

Responsible Materials

Responsible material selection starts with knowing what to avoid. Fortunately, the building and flooring industries have developed a clear set of tools to make that knowledge actionable.

The Green Science Policy Institute offers a practical way to identify and eliminate chemicals of concern: the Six Classes of Harmful Chemicals, which the institute categorizes as PFAS, antimicrobial treatments, flame retardants, bisphenols & phthalates, some solvents, and certain metals. Armed with this framework, campus planners can confidently specify flooring that is free of ortho-phthalates, PFAS, and antimicrobial treatments, and that carries low VOC emissions—all of which are chief among the most common concerns for floors.

Third-party certifications take the guesswork out of verification. When specifying flooring, the following are a few

reputable IAQ certifications building teams can look out for:

- FloorScore® certification, which confirms hard-surface flooring materials, adhesives, and underlayments meet strict IAQ emissions criteria referenced by LEED and other green building standards.
- Carpet and Rug Institute's Green Label Plus, which recognizes carpet, adhesive, and cushion products with the lowest VOC emissions on the market.
- UL GREENGUARD and GREENGUARD Gold Certifications, which indicate a product has low chemical emissions. The Gold Certification is especially apt for universities due to its distinguishment of "products that meet more stringent requirements often sought after in schools."
- Asthma & Allergy Friendly® certification, which signifies a product that has been scientifically proven to reduce exposure to asthma and allergy triggers from installation through daily cleaning.

Of course, published Health Product Declarations and Environmental Product Declarations remain a reliable way to identify manufacturers that are committed to material transparency, too. Together, these tools make it easy to specify with confidence.

Sustainable Maintenance

Every cleaning routine carries two costs: the labor to perform it and the chemicals used to get the job done. Forward-thinking facilities teams are specifying flooring solutions that keep both in check. No-finish products eliminate the need for periodic stripping and refinishing—cutting labor hours and reducing the volume of high-VOC strippers, sealers, and finishes that could otherwise impact IAQ with every maintenance cycle.

Maintenance strategy also plays a critical role in infection control, particularly across high-traffic campus zones like residence halls, dining halls, and campus health centers. Pathogens need three things to thrive: moisture, a food source (dirt and organic soil), and undisturbed places to settle. The

most effective flooring systems for infection control work by eliminating all three factors.

Continuous vinyl sheet flooring with heat-welded seams creates a monolithic surface, eliminating seams and small crevices where pathogens can hide. Even better is a floor that also has an integral cove base where the floor meets the wall. Instead of a typical 90-degree corner, an integral cove base is formed when the flooring is continued a few inches up the wall in a gentle radius, effectively removing the hard corner so dirt sweeps away easily. This also makes it easier to contain and clean spills.

The payoff for environmental services teams is significant. Having surfaces they can sweep, mop, and disinfect quickly with standard equipment is a real advantage when many are covering more square footage with fewer people. Plus, long-lasting, easy-to-maintain floors are proof that durability is itself a sustainability metric: Fewer replacements means less material waste and reduced lifecycle costs.

Moisture Management

According to the National Academies' Institute of Medicine Damp Indoor Spaces and Health report, damp indoor environments are widespread in buildings and are linked to increased mold growth and microbial activity, which, in turn, are associated with respiratory symptoms like coughing, wheezing, and asthma exacerbations. In fact, indoor dampness and mold exposure are estimated to contribute to approximately 21% of U.S. asthma cases—the leading chronic driver of the approximately 10 million school days missed annually due to asthma. For any building, moisture issues also bring financial stakes; for universities, stakes are multiplied even further, impacting not only maintenance budgets but also residence hall satisfaction and enrollment-driving campus reputation.

Indoor moisture is widely recognized as a key driver of IAQ, but the focus of moisture prevention operations and maintenance procedures is often placed on mechanical, plumbing, building envelopes, and site drainage. Moisture control on the floor is one of the most underestimated IAQ facility strategies.

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It all starts at the slab. Concrete slabs have the potential to continuously generate and retain moisture vapor, which migrates upward through flooring assemblies and into occupied spaces. Hardened concrete is filled with microscopic pores and capillaries through which water can travel by capillary action, just like how a paper towel draws up a spill. Waterproof coatings and membrane systems can be used to limit moisture intrusion, but their long-term performance is dependent on substrate stability. As such, flooring is a powerful, often-underused tool in the moisture-control toolkit.

Not all flooring systems are created equally. Modular systems contain hundreds of seams that each act as a vapor pathway. A typical classroom may have 500–1,200 linear feet of seams, depending on the type of flooring, with each seam acting as a chimney for moisture. Soft-surface floors with porous open-cell backings contain voids that allow moisture to travel through, which could enable mold growth and subfloor contamination.

If carpet is needed or desired in a building with increased slab moisture, opt for closed-cell carpet backing systems, which can suppress moisture vapor movement. A wall-to-wall impermeable closed-cell flooring system addresses moisture at its source—isolating slab vapor from indoor air, limiting accumulation within the assembly, and

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helping limit localized humidity within the floor assembly to reduce the conditions that drive mold growth and occupant health risk.

End-of-Life Responsibility

When specifying flooring solutions that align with a campus's sustainability commitments, it's easy to end product evaluations with the material, manufacturing process, and daily maintenance requirements. But taking into account the product's eventual end of life is equally important, offering an opportunity for universities to participate in the circular economy through responsible specification.

Flooring manufacturers today have invested time and resources into innovative landfill-avoidance solutions for products that have reached the end of their life. For example, there are open-loop (i.e., when a material or product can be recycled into a different product) circular pathways for vinyl flooring systems that turn the old flooring into new

automotive mats. Closed-loop (i.e., when a material or product can be recycled back into its original form) circular solutions exist, too, like carpet tile backings that can be recycled into new backings.

Be sure to look carefully at the manufacturer, not just the product. It's one thing for a manufacturer to label a floor as recyclable, but it's another thing for the manufacturer to proactively ask for old flooring to be returned to them for recycling and landfill avoidance solutions. When working on a renovation, specify new floors with a manufacturer that will accept the old flooring through a take-back and recycling program, even if the old flooring wasn't theirs.

When specified intentionally and responsibly, flooring can be a strategic investment in campus productivity, sustainability, and occupant well-being. One decision can help support good indoor air quality, simplify maintenance,

guard against moisture, and keep material out of landfills, meaning a single thoughtful choice can pay dividends across wellbeing, operations, and sustainability goals at once. For the facility managers, designers, and procurement teams shaping the campuses of tomorrow, that makes the floor beneath their feet one of the most powerful tools they have.



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