Hiding in plain sight: The future of higher ed recycling and trash disposal

Clean campuses attract more students—while saving money and the environment

Q&A with Matthew Turis, Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Van Dyk Recycling Solutions

Why is waste and recyclable production rising on college campuses?
As online shopping has proliferated over the past few years—in the recycling world, we call it the Amazon effect—we're seeing a lot more cardboard on college campuses. Whether it's product packaging or shipping boxes, the stream is definitely getting browner. In addition, the anonymity of large residential buildings such as dorms makes it easier for students to ignore recycling policies compared with homeowners, whose blue bins at the curb each week publicly demonstrate which households are recycling.

Why must higher ed institutions address these issues?
From an educational and environmental standpoint, it's the right thing to do. But there's also a financial component. A recent study said the value of recyclables has dropped 66% over the past year. Higher ed institutions with trash in recycling streams will lose money there, and they'll spend more money to dispose of trash weighed down with materials that could have been removed through recycling. At the same time, as more schools value beautiful, clean campuses to attract students, they must ensure their recycling and trash are properly handled.

Where do current efforts on college campuses fall short?
Colleges and universities often lack manpower to efficiently empty recycling and trash containers, creating overflow that prompts people to leave trash on the ground or in a recycling bin where there's more room. Large dumpsters are often located behind buildings, so students don't notice how much waste they're producing. And again, the anonymity of dorms works against proper recycling.

How does Van Dyk solve this problem more effectively than other sustainability or 'green' efforts?
Our underground waste containers are 4 to 9 cubic yards in volume, which dramatically increases storage at a given location. They have double drum doors that keep odors and germs inside, and vermin outside. Sensors track capacity so staff can arrange efficiently timed collections without constantly making the rounds.

Our containers are also aesthetically pleasing. A typical container looks the same as a regular garbage can. It sits on a 4-by-4-foot platform, but underneath is a vault that holds 46 times the waste of a typical storage bin. It is designed to prevent overflow, and there is an option to add chip card access to monitor usage. Staff can then pinpoint messaging.

For places that pride themselves on having a beautiful, clean campus, this is a much prettier solution than nasty, smelly dumpsters. Ultimately, it's about increasing storage and making waste disposal more fun and novel.

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