

If These (Green) Walls Could Talk

By: Stephanie O'Brien

This past June, I had the good fortune to attend the 8th Annual UC/CSU/CCC Sustainability Conference in Santa Barbara (not a bad place to be in June! Although most of the participants were UC and CSU representatives, there was also a wide array of vendors, consultants and other interested parties like me. The theme was *Working Our Way To Zero*, a lofty but achievable goal.

The 3-day conference was intended to be a comprehensive look at how to address sustainability in the educational environment. The program consisted of both plenary presentations and smaller educational sessions which were categorized into 13 separate tracks ranging from energy, water, waste management, food service, and transportation, to student affairs and health. There were several presentations that were of particular interest to Dovetail's clients, mainly within the Procurement", "Green Building Operations" and "Institutionalizing Sustainability" tracks. One area that was of special interest to me was the social equity track – designed to highlight awareness about the impact of production, waste and development on the poorer and disenfranchised communities that often surround our client locations.

But there was something missing. And that something was about FF&E as part of the equation. What became clear to me during the conference was that:

- Fixtures, Furniture & Equipment sustainability (with the exception of some furniture) is not part of the overall conversation, which greatly inhibits the potential contribution from an FF&E initiative as part of greening Capital Improvement Programs
- The level of engagement from the broader community within California Community Colleges relative to establishing FF&E criteria is virtually non-existent, which threatens the long-term success of any program.
- Many CCD's are bringing practical training for "Green Collar Jobs" into their curriculum, but very few are looking at industry tools with the intention of driving change like they do in more traditional trades such as Auto Technology and Nursing. This is a missed opportunity to take the lead in making wholesale environmental changes.

- Campus Groups in charge of making FF&E decisions are often overwhelmed and confused by vendor sustainability “lingo”, and sometimes take marketing claims as evidence of being “green”, without questioning the long term costs of ownership and ecological impact these items may have.
- Districts are not driving vendors to develop solutions that provide the lowest long term environmental impact at competitive prices. This lessens the CCD buying power potential over time.

Currently, the LEED certification process provides few opportunities for impact in the FF&E category. And even then, the main focus is only on furniture, with some consideration under Materials & Resources (MR) and Indoor Environmental Quality (EQ). Yet well over 40% of our client’s FF&E allocations go toward Fixtures and Equipment!

Some vendors are using an approach known as “Greenwashing.” They emphasize one or two specific features of their products or services, without addressing the complete impact on the environment. There are several manufacturers, vendors and publications that are “banging the green drum”, so to speak, but the **overall FF&E industry** is not part of the discussion. What often drives the selection of FF&E items, whether it is classroom furniture, laboratory equipment, or computer charging carts, is focus on simple or limited criteria, such as user familiarity, purchasing contract availability, or initial purchase cost. This approach inadvertently limits the motivation for the industry to take a leadership role in incorporating all aspects of sustainability, from raw materials needed to produce an item, through manufacture, packaging, delivery, installation and maintenance.

As thought leaders in the field of FF&E Coordination for California Community Colleges, we have been pondering what Dovetail can do to increase awareness about the critical criteria to make better decisions in order to achieve sustainable campuses. How can we go beyond LEED (as it relates to FF&E) and expand the evaluation process to include green criteria, without driving specific product specifications? And given the far-reaching impact of FF&E decisions, how can we encourage widespread campus involvement in the selection process? What action plans need to be developed to involve the surrounding communities and the campus population, including students, to take effective steps toward better decision making?

These are big questions, but ones that require immediate and on-going conversations with our clients and FF&E vendors for educational environments. Understanding the Total Cost of Ownership has long been the Dovetail rallying cry, and now we have to expand its



definition to include aspects of sustainability, beyond the source of production, and to address the conference themes that underscore the interconnectivity of the physical, operational, programmatic and social aspects of greening California Community Colleges. **Forward Thinking** will be our mantra as we take the lead in defining success for environmentally sustainable FF&E programs, and enabling all stakeholders to achieve the goals of social equity through effective decision making.