

Sustainability in Campus Housing: The Overlooked Reality of Sleeping on Eventual Trash

By Mike Padrnos and Christine Hansen

Often times when we think about sustainability on college campuses, we immediately think of recycling bins in dorm rooms, reusable water bottles, and auto-lighting. We may refuse to use items as small as a plastic straw or may be intent on printing our reports on 100 percent recycled paper.

All of that positively contributes to sustainability on college campuses and helps lessen our carbon footprint. However, it can be easy to overlook this logic when we apply it to bigger items that we use every day... *or night*. More often than not, residence hall and dormitory mattresses are disregarded in terms of the amount of eventual landfill trash students are sleeping on. No, we're not talking about poor quality dorm mattresses—that's a different story. We

are talking about what happens to residence hall mattresses when they've run their course.

MATTRESSES AND LANDFILLS

Roughly 20 million mattresses are thrown into landfills every year. That's the equivalent of 13.5 Empire State Buildings!

Depending on their construction, mattresses can sit in landfills for over 200 years. Because they don't decompose or breakdown like other waste products,

their shelf lives outlast the human lifespan, leaking chemicals into the ground and potentially causing pollution and water contamination. Mattresses can destroy animal habitats and ruin landfill equipment and take up valuable space.

What are the challenges associated with mattress recycling? Even "green campuses"—those leading the environmental charge, committed to sustainability initiatives—are finding it difficult to recycle their mattresses. There are few mattress recyclers available to them and the extra costs incurred (transit and recycling fees) can be budget breaking.

Repurposing, or the donation of used mattresses, is slowing as well due to the increased awareness of bed bugs and other sanitation concerns. With sustainability efforts on the rise and tens of thousands of mattresses being replaced from campus housing each year, it is important to find a reasonable recycling solution.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY SOLUTIONS

Fortunately, a few mattress manufacturers have recognized this growing environmental issue and are bringing environmentally friendly mattress solutions to the collegiate marketplace. There are new mattress constructions available today that are built using recycled or recyclable materials—constructions void of any harsh chemicals, foam or steel components.

With college and university sustainability officials increasing their focus on campus waste diversion rates, dorm mattress recycling may be a new area of study that may provide an alternative avenue to advance collegiate green initiatives. 

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