Think Clean When Going Green

Establishing a green cleaning program benefits the entire campus community.

BY LINDA CHIPPERFIELD

The websites of many universities are likely to tout that school’s commitment to the environment as prominently as they do their athletic facilities, dining options or on-campus activities.

Green initiatives have become a key tool for recruitment and rightfully a point of pride for many universities — from their efforts to reduce energy and water consumption to recycling programs. But there is one potentially green initiative that is not as visible — and often not as well addressed — and that is the school’s approach to cleaning. In fact, a green cleaning program might provide the greatest benefit of all to students, faculty and staff.

Cleaning products, especially those used in industrial or institutional settings, can contain hazardous or toxic chemicals and pose a threat to health. Not only do options exist for reducing the presence of these dangerous chemicals in the school environment, but safer cleaning practices can also be employed.

What constitutes a “green” cleaning program and how can a university implement one? Green Seal, an independent nonprofit that provides certification for sustainable products and services, developed a standard (GS-42) specifically for cleaning services used in industrial and institutional facilities. The standard provides an excellent guide to what a green cleaning program should include.

GS-42 addresses a wide range of factors, from the equipment and supplies that should be used, to staff training and planning. The standard outlines steps to be taken to reduce toxicity, waste and exposure during the cleaning process.

The requirements included in the standard offer detailed steps as to what a green cleaning program should include:

Planning — Programs should have a written set of standard operating procedures for custodial staff to follow and have building-specific green cleaning plans in place. There should also be a plan for use and regular maintenance of all power equipment.

Products, Supplies and Equipment — Only environmentally preferable products certified by an eco-label should be used, and new power cleaning equipment should meet criteria for performance, noise and emissions. Only EPA-registered disinfectants should be used.

Cleaning Procedures — The use of cleaning chemicals should be as efficient as possible to limit waste and exposure. Solid waste should be reduced by minimizing packaging and disposables, reusing supplies and recycling. Consideration should be given to entryways to minimize introduction of dirt into a building, and floors and carpets should be regularly maintained. Special care should be given to restrooms, dining areas and break rooms.

The requirements in GS-42 also call for implementation of a communications program to ensure coordination, and regular training for staff to ensure that sustainable procedures are being adhered to.

The standard has served as the basis for green cleaning programs at three universities to date — universities that subsequently became the first in the nation to receive certification by Green Seal under GS-42 for their cleaning service programs. Those universities are Harvard University, the University of Maryland and the University of Virginia.

The Housekeeping Services Unit of the University of Maryland’s Facilities Management department, for example, earned certification by implementing measures to meet the requirements of the standard and by enhancing the safety and sustainability of their cleaning procedures.

These measures included replacing floor burnishers that did not meet emissions and noise limits, replacing disposable materials such as cleaning cloths with washable and reusable alternatives and installing additional matting at building entrances to limit dirt and contaminants from entering buildings. Staff training programs were also held to prepare staff for implementing green cleaning procedures and incorporating new equipment and products in those procedures.

The University of Virginia’s (UVA) Building Services similarly used their pursuit of GS-42 certification as an opportunity to develop staff and to establish goals for cleaning quality and consistency in support of the health of workers, students and faculty.

UVA’s Building Services incorporated changes which included consulting with manufacturers for recommended cleaning products and equipment, avoiding cross contamination by separating restroom supplies from those used in other areas and monitoring power equipment to ensure effectiveness.

The cleaning services mentioned above completed the requirements in the GS-42 standard and earned Green Seal certification, an important credential in providing proof of a university’s sustainability efforts. For universities that are just developing a green cleaning program, the standard and guidelines for interpreting the requirements are free to download at greenseal.org/gs42.

While a green cleaning program is rarely touted as prominently on a university’s website as their football team, or even their overall commitment to sustainability, it is no less important. A commitment to green cleaning is one of the most important improvements schools can undertake when it comes to protecting the health and safety of their students, faculty and staff.

Linda Chipperfield is vice president of Marketing and Communications for Green Seal (www.greenseal.org).