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March 2009

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A Peter LI Education Group Publication

RENOVATE, REBUILD, OR RESTORE?

Tackling Change on Campus

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A Sign of the (Green) Times: The Rise of E-Cycling

As the use of technology grows, we have enjoyed increased capabilities, global networks, and faster results within personal, professional, and educational realms. Unfortunately, this shift to a technologically based global culture has introduced one of the largest growing problems in waste management: ensuring the proper disposal and sustainable treatment of outdated electronics. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as of 2007, approximately 235M obsolete electronic units had been shifted to storage, and 40M computers became obsolete in that same year alone. Remaining relatively constant in past years is the recycling rate of outdated electronics, at only 15 percent. As we consider the worldwide reach of electronics waste and the dismal outlook drawn by this low rate of recycling, we must look internally to find ways to contribute to the solution. Even the smallest institutions can help by contributing applicable electronics waste, or e-waste, to the recycling stream.

What does a college campus have to contribute to recyclable e-waste? The broad scope of electronics that are able to be safely recycled may surprise you. In addition to computer components, recyclable e-waste includes everything from telephones, televisions, data servers, and peripherals to security components and kitchen and cafeteria equipment. Research facilities may also choose to include defunct laboratory and engineering equipment.

Why E-Cycle?

The benefits of recycling electronics are many. Not only will recycling outdated electronics free up storage space, it can ensure sustainable and green campus-wide mandates are enforced, provide data security, return funds in the form of precious

metals reclamation, and prevent facilities from incurring fines for improper disposal.

Electronics contain valuable resource components, from precious metals to engineered plastics, which require substantial energy to manufacture and process. Recycling these components into new products uses fewer resources than manufacturing them from unique materials, resulting in lower environmental emissions. Additionally, the ability to strip de-manufactured components of valuable materials such as gold, silver, copper, and platinum allows recyclers to sell these metals in order to recover a portion of the cost of processing. Recycling the hazardous components such as lead, mercury, cadmium, and beryllium (many of which can be found in computer monitors) ensures that hazardous wastes are disposed of properly, rather than leeching into landfills and polluting natural resources.

Planning a Collection Event

When considering the systematic elimination of electronics waste, it may help the surrounding community if your institution offers a collection event. This will help promote community ties and allow a stronger position with which to arrange the pick-up of electronics with a local e-cycler. Not only will the collection event help the university, but it can also allow students and community members to clear their homes of e-waste.


Once you have decided to move forward with electronics recycling, be it privately or through a community event, the most important step is to select a trustworthy recycler with whom you'll partner.

There have unfortunately been instances of e-cycling companies betraying their customers' trust by disposing of waste using improper or unsafe methods.

This can include inappropriate dumping of toxic components or the exporting of e-waste overseas where at-risk, unprotected workers dismantle it. It is important that targeted questions are asked of potential e-cyclers to ensure proper steps are being taken to recycle and dispose of components responsibly. These questions include:

- Is the recycler licensed to handle hazardous waste? What procedural and environmental certifications do they possess?
- What is the final location of materials, and how is this route tracked? How and where are assets recycled and is that process auditable?

For more information on e-cycling, local regulations, and state recycling programs, visit the EPA e-cycling Webpage at www.epa.gov/waste/conservation/materials/recycling/index.htm.

Thankfully, the past few years have seen major progress in educating the public about e-cycling options and increasing participation in recycling programs. The EPA's recycling program, eCycling, reported recycling close to 67,000,000 lbs. of used electronics in 2008, nearly a 30 percent increase from 2007. States such as Illinois and California have implemented e-cycling programs to help consumers and institutions safely and easily recycle used and outdated electronics. As our new government works to pass green legislation, look to have programs implemented in your state and take advantage of new recycling opportunities to help your campus go green. 

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