

Green Mail

Promoting Greener Campuses via Campus Mail Centers

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Colleges and universities across the country are increasingly concerned about how to become “greener.” While a good deal of attention gets paid to making campus buildings and transportation more energy efficient, another promising, and perhaps overlooked, source is the campus mail center.

As centers of education and research, colleges and universities are on the cutting edge in many fields. Many companies, such as those in the sciences and medicine, offer products and services which academics and researchers use. For others, students offer attractive markets. These companies rely on catalogs, newsletters, and other types of correspondence to reach their college and university audiences. Unbeknownst to many, however, because of poor addressing much of this mail never reaches the intended recipient and in the process imposes needless costs on the institution and the environment.

Commercial Mail by the Ton

Two-thirds of the 1,200 mail pieces the US Postal Service estimates each of us receives a year is from commercial mailers. Campus mail exhibits a similar pattern. Assuming students, faculty, and staff receive two-thirds that amount (500 pieces) at campus addresses, college and university mail centers nationwide handle about 2.8 billion pieces of commercial mail *each year*.¹

- A weight measure may give a better perspective. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill mail center, which serves 27,000 faculty and staff, including student employees, alone receives 4.5 tons of mail *each week*.
- Nationwide, U.S. colleges and universities receive on the order of 176,385 tons of commercial mail each year.



Unfortunately, much of this mail arrives unsorted and is rife with misinformation. Because most colleges and universities are non-postal zones, they do not receive the benefits of postal automation including change of address or correction services.² Attempting to deliver unsorted mail which has not gone through basic address checks requires extra handling taking up precious time and resources.

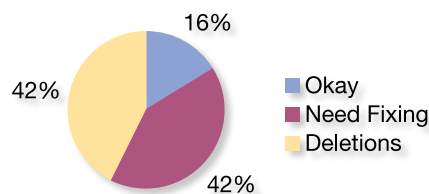
As Chart 1 shows,³ on average, more than 40 percent of commercial mailing lists consist of people no longer at the university or of duplicate records.⁴ These pieces are “undeliverable” and while some may be returned to sender most end up in “recycle” bins.⁵

Another 40 percent of mailer lists have incorrect or incomplete address information. Some universities, like Duke University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, require campus box numbers/mail codes to complete delivery. Other like Iowa State University, Penn State University, and the University at Buffalo need a department or building.

Absence of key address information significantly slows delivery as mail center staff has to look up the person and correct the address. Because time is precious to already overburdened mail services staff, many of these pieces also become fodder for recycling bins.

Chart 1

84% of Commercial Mail to Campus Addresses Has Problems



In short, 4 out of 5 pieces of commercial mail destined for campus locations have addressing problems which make delivery difficult, if not impossible. The impact on college and university resources and the environment is enormous.

is a slower 8 per minute. However, both come to a halt when a piece has incomplete or incorrect address information.

- At UNC Chapel Hill, extra handling of poorly-addressed mail to 27,000 faculty, staff and student employees costs an estimated \$99,760 each year – roughly 3 full-time equivalent staff.
- Nationwide, added annual labor costs amount to an estimated \$48.8 million.

What is worse, much of this mail ends up in the trash. Even using a conservative assumption that mail to people no longer



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Costs to Universities & Environment

Poorly-addressed mail requires extra handling. Most campus mail centers rely on manual sorting – a time consuming process. Because mail typically arrives unsorted, at least one sort is required to get a piece delivered. An average clerk can sort 18 letters per minute. The pace for flats (magazines, journals, catalogs, etc.)

there and half of that with incomplete or incorrect addresses is “recycled,” the annual environmental costs are substantial including: wood from more than two million trees; enough energy to power 42,137 homes; water enough to fill 2,790 swimming pools, and greenhouses gases from 52,468 automobiles.

Annual Environmental Impact from Undeliverable Campus Mail Nationwide

Wood Use (tons)	299,750	Equals	2,075,195 trees
Total Energy (mil BTUs)	3,834,509	Powers	42,137 homes/year
Sulfur dioxide (lbs)	2,856,821	Equals emissions of	519,422 18-wheelers/year
Greenhouse Gases (lbs CO2 equivalents)	577,828,931	Equals emissions of	52,468 cars/year
Nitrogen oxides (lbs)	1,949,595	Equals emissions of	7,470 18-wheelers/year
Particulates (lbs)	1,213,741	Equals emissions of	108,370 buses/year
Wastewater (gal)	1,789,332,286	Fills	2,709 swimming pools
Solid Waste (lbs)	232,646,542	Fills	8,309 garbage trucks

Environmental impacts estimated using the Environmental Defense Funds Paper Calculator (www.papercalculator.org). Assumes 105,381 tons of undeliverable campus mail each year printed on Coated Freesheet, e.g., high-end magazine, paper.

What UNC Chapel Hill Is Doing

The approach being implemented at UNC Chapel Hill to improve mail center operational efficiencies and reduce waste offers one promising model. There the mail center, business office, information technology department, and general counsel made the decision to partner with IMN in automating the address hygiene process.

Operating under strict confidentiality provisions, IMN's centralized database now warehouses names and addresses of the UNC Chapel Hill campus population. The electronic database is being used to remove from existing mailer lists people no

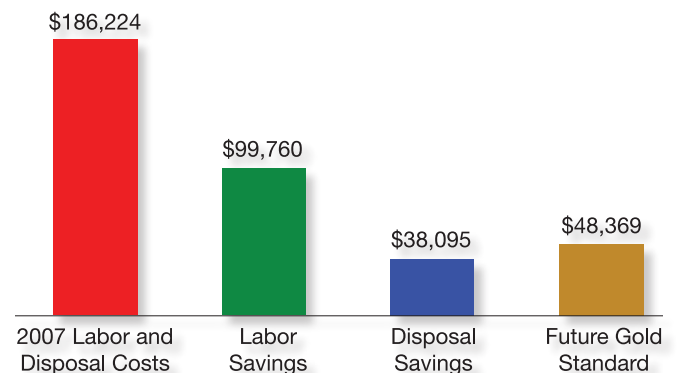
longer at UNC as well as to fix addresses with incomplete or incorrect information.

Early results are promising. The mail center has already reported that the first mailing from a cleansed list was "excellent" because "...all the mail had campus box numbers on it, with exception of a small few. This is a wonderful accomplishment." Of course, this is just a start. That same day, UNC also received 800 pounds (a full hamper) of a journal from an uncleansed list with no campus box numbers. Next on the agenda is to educate the offending mailer.

UNC Chapel Hill expects a substantial payoff in labor and recycling savings from its program to clean up the commercial mail stream. Chart 2 shows that \$186,224 in labor and recycling costs were expended in 2007 delivering commercial mail to faculty, staff, and student employees. Without extra handling and disposal of badly-addressed commercial mail, those costs could drop by up to *three-fourths*. Through participation in a centralized database and other measures to improve mail efficiency, UNC Chapel Hill should reach that future "gold standard"⁷

Chart 2

UNC Chapel Hill & IMN Project Present & Future



What Mail Centers Are Doing

Campus mail centers are on the front lines daily dealing with "offending", that is, badly-addressed, mail. A 2003 survey of mail centers conducted by IMN concluded that mail preparation across all sectors was at best "fair" and much was "poor."⁶

The situation today is no better and probably even worse. Mailers are adding to existing lists – bad as they are – new names and new problems all the time. For example, the volume of one biotechnology mailer to the University of Pennsylvania increased by 60 percent over the course of two years. Of the higher volume, half were people no longer there and another third needed fixing.

Mail centers are starting to become proactive. Some attempt to contact mailers directly about problem mail. Kay Ingle, mail center manager at the University of California at Berkeley, works with IMN to notify mailers of specific problems. Recent examples include:

- "They sent a presorted first class mailing without department names or mail codes. We looked them up this time but will RTS [return to sender] them next time if they do not clean up their mailing list."
- "They sent a presorted bound printed matter photography catalog that had no mail codes and only a few department names so most were recycled."

Awareness that mail is not reaching target audiences often prompts mailers to begin cleaning up their addresses and thereby the mail stream. Unfortunately, software tools, such as the Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS) and National Change of Address (NCOA), which commercial mailers use to validate USPS residential and business addresses do not work for campus addresses.

For meaningful change to happen, the greater college and university community – beyond the campus mail center – must become actively involved. That takes greater awareness of the economic and environmental costs of problem mail and what can be done.

What the College Sector Can Do

The economic and environmental costs of poorly-addressed commercial mail are substantial. Correct campus addressing would result in sizable savings to schools, commercial mailers, and the environment. Colleges and universities would save the labor, collection, and disposal costs associated with handling and getting rid of undeliverable mail pieces. Mailers would save the creative, printing, and postage costs of producing mail pieces that never reach the intended recipient. And, last, but by no means least, significant amounts of environmental resources – trees, water, energy, and landfill area – would be spared.

Here are some suggestions as to how colleges and universities can use campus mail centers to become more sustainable as well as save money.

1. Start a “Best Practices” Mail Policy

To name but a few, schools such as the College of Charleston, Montana State University Residence Life, UC Berkeley, the University of Houston, and Washington University in St. Louis are implementing “best practices” policies which address the problems of poor addressing and unsorted mail.⁸ “Best practices” call for commercial mailers to both clean up addresses and presort mailings destined to the college or university. If a mailer continues to send in unsorted or poorly addressed mail, the mail is either returned to sender or trashed, depending on the class of mail. In either case, the mailer is informed of the action taken.

2. Raise Campus Awareness to the Issue of Undeliverable Mail

Find out how much undeliverable mail is received by your institution and investigate what happens to it. Create a sense of buy-in by getting all interested parties – mail services, information technology, recycling, and the administration – involved.

Mailers often receive information directly from faculty, staff, and students. Make clear to the general campus community

Endnotes


- 1 Of the 10.4 million college undergraduates that the U.S. Census reported in 2004, an average 44 percent live on campus. Combining this with an assumed 17 students for each faculty member and 26 students for each staff member implies an on-campus population of 5.6 million.
- 2 While the USPS brings mail to the campus, the college or university mail center or residential life is responsible for delivery to the ultimate recipients - students, faculty, and staff. For more on non-postal zones, see Aldona Robbins, “Sorting Out the Problems: Colleges and Universities Rate Commercial Mailers,” *Colleges Services*, December 2003.
- 3 The estimates in Chart 1 are from address hygiene done by Intra-Mail Network in concert with colleges and universities on more than a quarter million commercial mailer records over the last three years.
- 4 Even though mailers “de-dupe” lists before mailing, their processes may miss duplicates because addresses are not exactly the same or the person’s name is misspelled. Adding insult to injury, duplicate pieces are sometimes mailed to people no longer at the university.
- 5 Commercial mail often is standard class. Sometimes local US post offices elect not to pick up undeliverable campus mail regardless of class of mail. It also is time consuming and expensive to package mail and return to sender.
- 6 Robbins, “Sorting Out the Problems.”
- 7 The term “Gold” Standard represents the impact of address hygiene on commercial mail through the IMN process at a 100% saturation level. The costs and savings reported do not include funds spent processing undeliverable mail to the nearly 9,500 resident students on campus.
- 8 For more information on “best-practices” policies, contact IMN at qualityaddressing@intra-mail.com.

what constitutes a deliverable address and stress the importance of using them. Encourage those leaving the institution to inform mailers of their new addresses.

3. Become a Partner in the Centralized Address Hygiene DB

As USPS has done, colleges and universities need to automate their address hygiene systems. UNC Chapel Hill’s partnership with IMN in a centralized database for address hygiene is proving to be an effective model. Operating under strict confidentiality provisions which restrict its use to existing mailer lists, the database is being used to remove people no longer at UNC as well as to fix addresses with incomplete or incorrect information electronically.

Conclusion

Doing nothing is not an option. Colleges and universities must meet the problem of bad addressing head on. Otherwise, mail services will waste time handling and correcting mail, the institution will incur another round of costs to recycle or haul away undeliverable mail and the environment will have needlessly expended more valuable trees, water, energy, and land resources. The time to act is *now*. 



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