Operations and maintenance were once the central focus of an educational institution’s facilities management department. Then came sustainability, energy management, safety and security, and capital construction programs vying for attention. Over the last several years, these advancements have altered the daily operations and overall objectives of academic facilities departments.

While one may first think of universities and colleges when considering the evolution of facilities management in an educational setting, independent schools deal with similar issues. These institutions also focus on improving facilities processes, analyzing operations, and leveraging limited budgets, all while maintaining campuses that are attractive and functional for students and staff.

As executive search consultants who specialize in securing professionals for facilities management and related roles within academic institutions, we see a trend of independent schools initiating more proactive approaches to their facilities programs. Most strategize about master planning, preventative maintenance, energy efficiency, and sustainability initiatives.

An increasing number of independent schools are analyzing their facilities management programs related to:

**Maintaining historic architecture while integrating new trends in building design**

Maintaining traditional campus settings is critical to most independent schools as many of these institutions, particularly boarding schools, are more than 100 years old and have campuses of historic significance. While it can be done, integrating modern amenities that address the needs and wants of 21st century learners is challenging when trying to retain the ambience of an “old school” setting. Facilities departments have to weigh considerations carefully and set standards for new construction and renovations to ensure they don’t lose the feel of a traditional environment.

**Leveraging technological advancements**

Building management systems, energy and utility programs, and other innovative technologies have significantly transformed facilities management. To leverage advancements, independent schools must have facilities teams that stay abreast of new developments and understand how to apply these advanced tools to operations in the most effective manner with limited financial resources.

**Weighing outsourcing versus in-house facilities management**

Outsourcing is often contemplated by independent schools because some find it more beneficial and cost-effective to retain an outside firm to conduct their facilities management. Others prefer to have the control that comes with having an in-house team. There are pros and cons to both options, and each can make sense depending upon a school’s needs. Furthermore, the right option can change in time so it’s a constant debate.
Balancing major capital programs with maintenance and operations

Embarking on a capital plan can be a major undertaking for many different reasons that go beyond having the financial resources. Most programs have to be rolled out in phases because they have complex logistics, and there are numerous factors to consider such as sustainable design and alternative delivery methods. These types of initiatives can be draining on a facilities department whose primary focus is operations and maintenance. Furthermore, there are times when a school may not have the appropriate team members to achieve all of their goals simultaneously. For example, not every facilities director understands construction as well as maintenance and operations, which can create a skills deficit within a department.

Implementing safety and security programs

Unfortunately, safety and security have become some of the most critical issues of our time. Facilities departments play the lead role in these programs that span space planning and access control to emergency preparedness. Plans must be efficient and comprehensive for the safety of everyone within their communities.

Facilities management departments within independent schools have multiple components for which they are responsible. Although many of these schools have smaller campuses than higher education institutions, their initiatives and challenges can be equally complex, and they work diligently to maintain their facilities progressively and effectively for the benefit of their entire academic communities.

Helbling & Associates is a retained executive search firm specializing in facilities management, construction, engineering, and real estate development.