

Return to ~~Sender~~ TRASH

Mail Services Address Hygiene Is the
Key to Obtaining the Highest Level of
Sustainability

by

Aldona Robbins

Walk into a typical campus mailroom and one is likely to see a sight like the one below - postal bins brimming over with catalogs, magazines, newspapers, and letters. Most of the mail pieces are unsolicited with standard-class postage. Commonly called "commercial/junk mail," much of it will never reach the student, faculty, or staff member for whom it is intended.

Just like personal correspondence, bill statements, and other types of campus mail, commercial mail arrives at the mail center unsorted. Dealing with unsorted, poorly addressed mail imposes significant costs on the college sector and on the environment, hampering the efforts of colleges and universities to become more sustainable.¹ This article focuses on the problems of campus addressing regarding commercial mail and presents estimates of some of the labor and environmental costs to the college sector. Last, the article offers ways of reducing the amount of poorly addressed mail inbound to colleges and universities.

What Is Poorly Addressed Campus Mail?

A poor address has incomplete or incorrect information. An incomplete campus address may be missing a critical box number or department, which is the basis for delivery. An incorrect campus address may be one, which has the wrong box number or is obsolete because the intended recipient has moved off campus or is no longer employed by the university. While commercial mailers do perform address hygiene before mailing, the commonly used tool does not cleanse most campus addresses.² Because the mailer has no way of knowing that the address is "bad," the faulty address will likely be used over and over again.

Poor addressing entails more work for the university. To be delivered, mail with missing or incorrect information requires someone to take the time to look up the right address and correct the label. First-class mail addressed to students, faculty, or staff who have moved off campus may be forwarded to the new address, if there is one. Otherwise this, along with standard mail bearing obsolete addresses and mounds of unsorted commercial mail, will likely end up in the trash or "recycle" bin.



How much is there?

The United States Postal Service (USPS) estimates that two-thirds of mail is unsolicited, standard class mail. Campus mail centers experience a similar pattern. Sally Rowland, Director of Printing and Postal Services at the University of Houston, reports that, of the 2.7 million pieces inbound last year, 1.8 million (67%) was standard class. While letters come in trays, most catalogs, journals, newspapers, and other “flats,” which are more difficult to handle, arrive in sacks or tubs. Virtually all of it is unsorted.

That means, of the 1,200 mail pieces each of us receives during the year, 800 pieces are commercial mail. Assuming students, faculty, and staff receive two-thirds of the amount (500 pieces) at campus addresses, college and university mail centers nationwide handle about 2.8 billion pieces of commercial mail each year.³

Campus addresses on this mail tend to be of poor quality. Commercial mailers usually get their lists from varied sources including: the college or university telephone book or alumni association; information provided by faculty, staff, or students through purchases, subscriptions, conference registrations, and so forth; and list brokers. Evidence suggests that 40 percent of the information mailers obtain is either addresses for people no longer at the school or duplicative, that is, the same

person receives two, three, or more of the same piece.⁴ This type of address error is completely wasteful as these pieces should never enter the mail stream and, therefore, never arrive on campus only to end up in the trash.

Another 40 percent of campus addresses leave out critical information or contain errors. To “go the last mile” and reach the intended recipient, someone has to take time to look up and correct the address. Because time is a precious commodity to already- overburdened mail services staff, many of these pieces also end up in the trash bin.

In short, 4 out of 5 pieces of unsorted, commercial mail destined for campus locations have addressing problems. Much of it will end up in the trash, thus justifying the term “junk mail.”

78% of Commercial Mail to Campus Addresses Has Problems

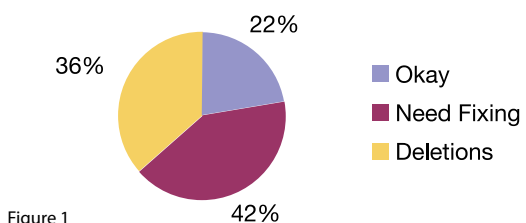


Figure 1

What Poor Addressing Costs Colleges & Universities

Just how much are colleges and universities spending to deal with poorly addressed commercial mail? Apart from the normal manual sorting performed on virtually all in-coming mail, 80 percent of commercial mail likely needs extra handling. The additional labor costs imposed depend to a large degree on the workload and policy of each campus mail center.

Labor Costs

Assuming that poorly addressed mail takes one extra manual sort and 4 percent gets looked up, the additional labor resources would cost colleges and universities \$48.8 million nationwide.⁵ Because most of this mail is ultimately thrown away, two-thirds, or \$33.1 million, of the extra labor resources would, in effect, be wasted. That amount would be enough to fund \$30,000 scholarships for 1,100 students.

These estimates also may be viewed from the perspective of an individual school. The extra labor costs by size of on-campus population (shown in parentheses) would be:

- Small-medium (5.5k): \$47,600 of which \$32,200 is waste
- Medium-large (12k): \$103,700 of which \$70,300 is waste
- Large (15k): \$129,600 of which \$88,900 is waste

Because these estimates are based on fairly conservative assumptions, actual experience could be considerably higher.

Disposal Costs

On top of these added labor resources are the costs of collecting and disposing of commercial mail that ends up in the trash. Colleges and universities across the country are becoming increasingly concerned with protecting the natural resources and ecosystems of the planet. Reducing the sheer volume of paper waste and, therefore, the need for disposal is a primary goal of sustainability. One of the schools in the forefront is the University of California Berkeley.⁶ Lisa Bauer, manager of Campus Recycling and Refuse Services, points up how expensive disposing of commercial mail can be to the school and to the environment. In fiscal year 2004-2005, UC Berkeley recycled 1,874 tons of paper trash – roughly 30 percent of which was commercial mail. At about \$55 per recycled ton, collecting and disposing of this mail cost the university \$28,110. In the absence of its aggressive recycling program, taking commercial mail to a landfill would have cost the university almost 2.5 times more.⁷

Assuming that three-fourths of poorly addressed commercial mail is ultimately thrown away, the annual cost to colleges and universities nationwide would range between \$5.8 million and \$12.7 million, depending on how much is recycled.⁸ These funds could be used for hundreds more scholarships.

Assuming a school recycles half the commercial mail that is thrown away, annual disposal costs by size category would be:

- Small to medium: \$9,000
- Medium to large: \$19,700
- Large: \$24,600

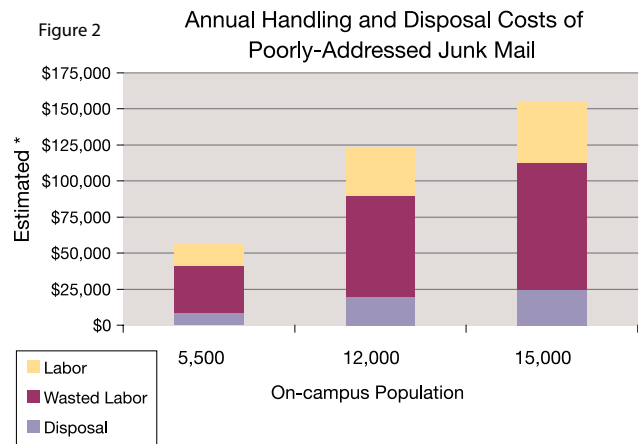


Figure 2 shows that labor costs handling commercial mail with bad addresses far outweigh disposal costs. Most of that labor is wasted as most of the mail ends up in the trash. Adding in disposal costs, the amount of resources wasted is almost three times larger than the labor spent on delivery.

This does not minimize the environmental costs. According to Environmental Defense, the environmental savings if just 10 percent of the paper used in catalogs were recycled include:

- 851,000 tons of wood - enough to build a six-foot fence stretching across the United States seven times
- 3.8 trillion BTUs of total energy – enough to provide continuous residential power to Boulder, CO
- 521,000 tons of CO₂ equivalents - the annual emissions from 91,000 cars driven 200 miles a week.⁹

Think of the potential savings if mailers eliminated a mere 10 percent of the commercial mail with obsolete addresses.

What the College Sector Can Do

The economic and environmental costs of poorly addressed commercial mail are substantial. Using 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 finally, significant amounts of environmental resources – trees, water, energy, and landfill area – would be spared.

Here are some recommendations as to how colleges and universities can become more sustainable as well as save money.

1. Establish a Best Practices Mail Policy

Schools including the College of Charleston, Montana State University Residence Life, Texas A&M University, UC Berkeley, the University of Houston, and Washington University in St. Louis have begun establishing “best practices” policies which address the problems of poor addressing and unsorted mail.¹⁰ “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 Mailer Awareness

Mailers assume their address information is correct unless they hear otherwise. Because low response rates are normal, the mailer will continue to mail defective addresses unless the school becomes proactive. Working with Intra-Mail Network, Kay Ingle, manager of Mail Services at UC Berkeley, notifies mailers when mail is undeliverable because of insufficient addressing. Because of an aggressive campaign, she has seen significant improvement over the last year.

3. Stress Importance of Using Appropriate Campus Address

Mailers sometimes receive address information from college and university alumni associations and other similar campus organizations. These organizations should be encouraged to work with campus mail centers and residential life to ensure that addresses are accurate and up to date. The mail center also can help coordinate efforts to have mailings based on this address information first go through existing presort software, thereby saving on labor resources.

In addition, mailers sometimes get addresses directly from faculty, staff, and students. Unfortunately, they often “do not know where they live.” They may give a building name instead of box number or a department instead of street address. Colleges and universities should make clear what constitutes a deliverable campus address and stress the importance of using *correct* and *complete* addresses.

4. Encourage Those Leaving Campus to Inform Mailers

Another way to reduce the problem at the source is to encourage faculty, staff and students who are leaving the college or university to inform mailers of their new addresses. Berkeley's Lisa Bauer goes one step further. She asks departing students to fill out forms, which request mailers to remove their names from lists altogether.¹¹

5. Participate in a Centralized Address Hygiene Database

Some schools are participating in centralized database for address hygiene purposes only. Operating under strict confidentiality provisions that restrict its use to existing lists, the database is being used to remove obsolete and format incomplete addresses in mail destined for colleges and universities. Participating schools are seeing a substantial reduction in the amount of incoming junk mail, bad addressing, and waste.¹²

Conclusion

College and university mail centers that have adopted measures described above have reduced volume, become more productive and efficient, and have contributed to global sustainability. ♦



Aldona Robbins has more than 25 years experience in quantitative analysis and economic policy. Since 1985, she and husband Gary have operated Fiscal Associates, a consulting firm. Both have been partners in IMN since 2002. She earned a doctorate in economics from the University of Pittsburgh, has held positions at the US Departments of Treasury and Labor, and most recently served on the Board of Scientific Counselors for the National Center for Health Statistics. Contact her at aldona.robbins@intra-mail.com.

- 1 A sustainable university is one whose core values include: respect for the biota and natural processes, mindfulness of place, living within planetary limits, accounting for full costs, and civic responsibility. See *Penn State Indicators Report 2000 - Steps Toward a Sustainable University*, www.bio.psu.edu/greendestiny/steps.shtml.
- 2 The Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS) is software approved by the US Postal Service and used by commercial mailers to determine postal rates. CASS compares mailer addresses to USPS 5-digit zip codes, zip+4 codes, and carrier route codes.
- 3 Census reported there were 10.4 million college undergraduates in 2004 (see *US Census 2004, College Enrollment*, Table A-7). On average, about 44 percent of undergraduates live on campus. According to Student Monitor, there are 17 students for each faculty member and 26 students for each staff member. Combining this information implies an on-campus population of 5.6 million.
- 4 Address hygiene performed on faculty and staff mail by IMN indicates that 37 percent are either duplicates or addressed to people no longer on campus. Another 42 percent have addresses with incomplete or incorrect information.
- 5 Estimates are based on USPS sorting rates of 18 letters per minute and 8 flats per minute, assuming an hourly wage of \$7.50 on the extra sort and an hourly wage of \$15 for name look ups averaging 30 seconds.
- 6 For more info on UC Berkeley's efforts, see *The Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Sustainability, UC Berkeley Campus Sustainability Assessment*, Apr 2005, www.sustainability.berkeley.edu/assessment.html.
- 7 Collection and disposal costs amount to \$120 per ton. Recycling offsets \$60 to \$70 of that cost.
- 8 According to USPS, 75 percent of mail is letter; 25 percent is flat. Estimates assume a letter weighs one ounce and a flat weighs 5 ounces.
- 9 *Environmental Defense, Does Your Catalog Care* (www.environmentaldefense.org/documents/2456_Doesyourcatalogcare.pdf).
- 10 For more information on best-practices policies, contact IMN at qualityaddressing@intra-mail.com.
- 11 For further information on removing names from mailer lists, visit www.stopwaste.org.
- 12 For more information on the address hygiene database, contact IMN at qualityaddressing@intra-mail.com.