

The Benefits of People Counting on College Campuses



Higher Education: The Catch 22

Universities are expected to provide value to their students through on-campus resources, facilities and organizations. But as higher education budgets continue to be cut, it is becoming increasingly harder for them to do so.

According to a recent report from the U.S. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities public universities and colleges across the country have experienced sharp budget cuts in 2013.

Nearly every state spent, on average, 28 percent less in 2013 than they did in 2008 when the recession hit.

Thirty-six states cut higher education funding by more than 20 percent; 11 states cut funding by more than one-third; and two states (Arizona and New Hampshire) cut funding in half.

In response to this nationwide phenomenon, colleges and universities have been forced to raise tuition and make changes that undermine the quality of their educational offerings.

Another problem is that while budgets decrease, enrollment has been steadily increasing. Because of the “baby boom echo” – a surge in the 18- to 24-year-old population – public higher education enrollment has increased by about 1.3 million full-time equivalent students since the beginning of the recession, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers’ Association.

People counting systems allow universities to optimize their buildings to make the most out of a tight budget, while also providing exceptional service to an influx of new students. Sensors can be installed above doors, hallways and seating areas to track the amount of people who come in and out of campus buildings. These numbers are sent to a central system, where the information is consolidated into a meaningful report showing how many people visited the building in a given period of time.

There are four main benefits of implementing a people counting system on a college campus: visibility, space, value and budget.

1. Visibility

Student unions and libraries are the hub of activity on college campuses. Students and faculty filter in and out of the building throughout the day to eat, study, meet with friends and use the facilities. Before people counting technology, one of the only ways to track visitors was through sales history. However, in campus buildings, using those practices would be extremely short-sighted considering many of the building's resources are free and some visitors will never make a purchase.

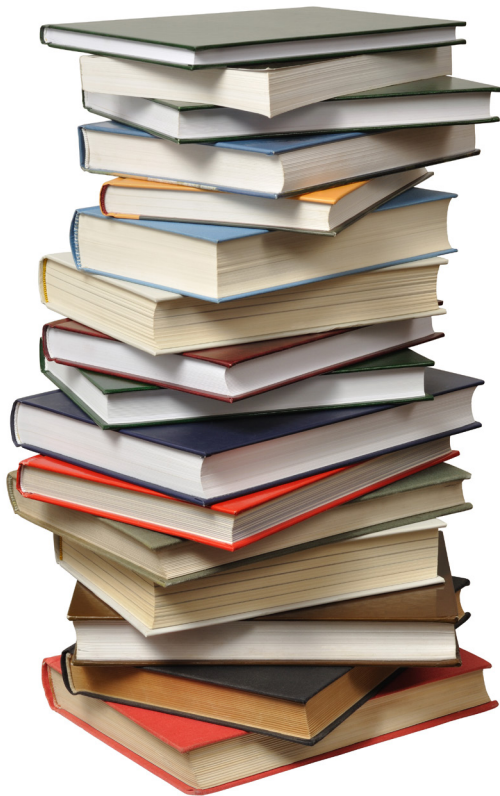
Still, universities must keep track of the amount of people using their facilities in order to operate efficiently. **Without knowing how many visitors there are, it is impossible to know how many resources are needed to accommodate students.** This includes food, study materials, computers, printers, workout equipment and more. By counting the amount of people who enter and exit the building on a daily basis, whether they make a purchase or not, people counters provide an all-inclusive visitor count, regardless of who purchased food or supplies.



2. Space

Space is among the many strained resources in the university setting. **On average, space represents about 20 percent of the operational budget for an educational institution, according to the Tertiary Education Facilities Management Association.**

The availability of adequate space for learning and teaching is crucial for colleges and universities, and making the most out of available space is becoming especially important as schools continue to fight for funding. Any kiosks, vendors or equipment needed for a student union, library or recreational center must fit into the building's allotted space and budget constraints. Efforts to expand – or reorganize – must be carefully planned. Installing people counters above doors and hallways allow universities to conduct an audit of the building's usage.



For expansion

As enrollment continues to increase, new buildings must be built to facilitate incoming students. Existing buildings must also follow in these footsteps. People counting systems can pave the way for success and growth, allowing university officials to justify the expansion of facilities. How? Traffic reports bring attention to patterns and trends in building usage – information that comes in handy during renovations and redesign processes.

By knowing the areas that tend to attract a consistent flow of customers, universities can strategically place vendors and resources to maximize the return on their investments. Institutions can also analyze areas that aren't garnering student traffic and figure out why. For example, if areas on the first floor are receiving more traffic than areas on the second floor, perhaps some rearranging is in order.

For advertising

Low traffic numbers could also be indicative of a lack of advertising. For example, perhaps students are unaware that there are additional resources on the second floor. Knowing the most-traveled doors and hallways in the building may come in handy when placing informational fliers, kiosks or help desks for new students. Student organizations and building employees can use data from traffic reports to determine where to place advertisements in order to reach the largest number of students possible.

For budget allocation

Also, knowing which buildings on campus or areas of the student union receive the most traffic can tell a university where to concentrate its money. It may be the fitness center; it may be the cafeteria. Whichever the area, if it is heavily-traveled then it is likely to return the money that was spent on it. Likewise, traffic data can be used to pinpoint the buildings or areas that may need some revamping or remodeling.

3. Value

Counting people allows university buildings and organizations to do two things: **1) ensure that they are providing value to students, and 2) prove to administration that they are a valuable campus resource.** This is especially useful when it comes time to tighten the budget.

It is important for universities to provide valuable experiences through their campus resources and facilities, because the buildings themselves are a useful tool to recruit new students. According to Dr. Michael Lewis, a professor of American architecture at Williams College, prospective students' first impression of a university is increasingly becoming based on atmosphere. Lewis wrote "Forget Classrooms. How Big is the Atrium in the New Student Center?" for the Chronicle of Higher Education.

However, the need for an attractive student union does not stop with new students. According to Jeffrey Turner, Abby Fifer, and Bart Hall, vice president, analyst and senior project manager for Brailsford & Dunlavy facility planners, today's universities are competing for increased budget and enrollment, therefore, "colleges and universities are working to build memorable first impressions for prospective students and cultivate positive experiences for current students."

To students

To maintain a valuable and positive experience for students, universities can use people counting systems to keep track of traffic as things change over time. A shift in traffic numbers can indicate a shift in students' opinion about building hours, available resources or customer service.

For example, students might be dissatisfied if their student union had reduced hours during finals week and decide to go to a local coffee shop instead. Likewise, these numbers can also be used to demonstrate an increase in traffic as a result of increased hours or building expansion.

People counting sensors can also be used to gauge the success or value of an event, such as a dinner, tournament, film screening or concert. To avoid wasting money, it would be helpful for the event planning or programming board to know which activities students like and dislike. In the long run, universities will have a better idea of the forms of entertainment that will provide the most return on their investment.

To administration

As mentioned, many institutions have had to cut spending in ways that diminish the quality of education they provide. For example, according to the Arizona Board of Regents, the state's university system cut more than 2,100 positions and merged, consolidated or eliminated 182 colleges, schools, programs and departments.

People counting data can ensure that certain campus resources don't get the axe when it comes time to make cuts. Student unions and libraries, for example, can use people counting data to prove to administration that they are a valuable resource to students. Facility managers can provide detailed traffic reports showing student use over a period of time, demonstrating that it is steady or has increased.

4. Budget

It will always be important for universities to use their money wisely. Decreases in budget and increases in enrollment can easily put a strain on university resources. But as universities raise tuition to offset their tight budget, students and parents alike expect improvements to the facilities or the curriculum. As mentioned, campus buildings – especially student unions – are instrumental in attracting and engaging incoming freshman. That’s why it is important for universities to have each building running as efficiently as before, if not more so.

With knowledge of building’s busiest and slowest times, managers can make sure the building is running at optimal efficiency. To put it simply: they can reduce operation hours and personnel needs when the building isn’t as busy, and augment them when it is. Doing so allows universities to only spend what they need to, rather than overcompensating.



Building hours

Instead of making estimations, university officials and facility managers can calculate operating hours based on accurate data about when people enter and exit the building. For example, student unions often have several rooms and floors, making it hard to guess how long each area is in use. With a sensor installed over doors and hallways, facility managers can track building usage trends and hourly traffic counts and determine when to open and close. This also rings true for holiday and seasonal breaks, when campus buildings must amend their schedules.

Building personnel

Many universities can't afford to consistently pay several employees to work the same shift, and even if they can, they shouldn't have to. People counting systems allow facility managers to optimize labor in each campus building. Traffic reports generated from a people counting system can be used to estimate the proper amount of employees for peak and non-peak times in any given day, week, month, semester or year. Facility managers can pinpoint specific time windows where more or less staff members are needed.

Not to mention, student unions and concert halls often host well-attended events – sometimes several at once – where the building will need additional personnel. Monitoring traffic counts for each event allows universities to forecast staffing needs for future special occasions.

Building maintenance

Facilities can use people counting data to estimate the amount of resources needed for the building, rather than spending too much “just to be safe.” With traffic reports showing how many people are using the building, universities can justify their requests for additional cleaning supplies, food vendors, weight machines, etc. Building traffic data can also be used to modify cleaning schedules in order to get as much done as possible during down time.

Higher education has taken several hits since the recession. Although funding and resources are scarce, the demand for a quality education has not wavered. In response, institutions like Princeton, University of Arizona, University of Utah, University of Wisconsin, Colorado State University, University of Vermont, Indiana University, University of Kansas and University of Missouri are turning to people counting systems to continue to provide value to students during these tough financial times.



About Traf-Sys

From our headquarters and Data Center in Pittsburgh, PA, Traf-Sys Inc. provides people counting systems, software and support to more than 7,000 locations. We offer a broad range of traffic counting solutions that deliver unparalleled accuracy and reliability. Our people counting solutions solve a variety of traffic monitoring challenges for all types of organizations including some of the largest shopping centers, retail store chains, universities, libraries and casinos in the United States.

Whether you are trying to measure traffic to support project funding, optimize labor, determine advertising effectiveness, or increase conversion ratios, Traf-Sys provides the tools to leverage key metrics to improve the performance of your business. Our people counting solutions provide actionable information that helps organizations increase profitability and optimize operational efficiency by analyzing visitor traffic to make informed business decisions.



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