

Trinity University Furniture Buying Guidelines

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I. Introduction – Insider’s Guide to Buying Office Furniture

Buying office furniture requires practical considerations that go far beyond aesthetics. Factors to consider in every decision include; comfort, safety, durability & compatibility for employees, students and our guests. Establishing a few guidelines can help ensure that the furniture selection process will yield an improved overall satisfaction & productivity for the university.

II. Buy with a Vision or Plan

It is best to plan in advance allowing enough time for competitive pricing and before funding request deadlines. Rushing through furniture decisions could lead to choices that will be regretted for years to come. Before processing or investing in office furniture it is highly recommended the Purchasing Office be contacted for collaboration and guidance.

Accurately Assess Your Needs: The selection process should start with the end in mind. If it is a chair, for example, will it be used occasionally as in a guest chair or all day such as a desk chair? Does it have to be height-adjustable or fixed? Should it be light enough to be moved or will it be stationary? Should it be stackable, collapsible, nest, with casters or without casters? The more thought given to a purchase, the greater likelihood the end result will meet all the required needs.

Analyze what we already have: It can be helpful to solicit input from any staff member who uses the furniture on a daily basis. For example, if selecting lobby furniture – visit departments that have recently purchased new lobby furniture. Evaluate how well the furniture has held up in an everyday use. Consider the warranty, sustainability features. If it is functional or ergonomic furniture consider the ease of adjustments. Determine if this furniture purchase will be consistent with other furniture in the building. It is preferred that the furniture be of the same manufacturer, finish & color scheme be consistent. For example; furniture in Northrup Hall, Storch, Ruth Taylor all have a consistent look after reconstruction or new build.

Sustainability: Furniture manufacturers are well aware of environmental factors and use these factors as selling points. Example of some common terminology to look for when purchasing furniture; Air quality of manufacturing plants, pre & post-recycled content, Leed Points, Green Guard Certified, etc. Most of this information can easily be found on the company’s website. Trinity is working to reduce our global footprint in energy and recycling, developing ways to protect our environment in research and writing, and training students to carry forward the work of making tomorrow greener than today (Trinity University’s **Presidents Climate Commitment** <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org>). See reference to the various product lines purchased under the Sustainable Furniture at Trinity University document.

Choose timeless style over trendy: The best long-term value in furniture selection is a simple, yet appealing design. By purchasing furniture with a timeless appearance, it will be easier to add complementary pieces as the university grows and styles change.

III. Consider Employee Comfort and fit for Space

Ergonomics and productivity: When it comes to office furniture, comfort equals productivity. Ergonomic design is critical to the comfort and productivity of faculty, staff and students. Features such as contoured seats, lumbar backrest supports, adjustable seats and armrests can help minimize work-related injuries and lost workdays. In turn, those factors can help reduce costs for worker's compensation and medical insurance.

Space planning is vital: Furniture should fit properly in areas to allow ADA clearance to walkways and doorways. The Purchasing Office can request Physical Plant CAD drawings to get specific office measurement of office spaces. Vendors will also do field measurements to confirm more precise dimensions of the allocated space, especially if columns, windows or other obstacles are involved. Some vendors will add design fees which will ultimately increase the overall cost of furniture. Be aware of these additional costs. In large projects it is often well worth it but for small spaces & limited budget funds, the costs might be unattainable.

IV. Selecting the Material

Fabric Selection: It's important to evaluate the utility and use that furniture is going to have before choosing the material. If cleanliness is a priority, wipe-able vinyl (or leather) might be the right choice for you. Vinyl is great for areas where stains are more prevalent – from break rooms to examination rooms. Vinyl fabrics have come a long way from the 70's look. Vinyl is now softer, more leather like with a variety of colors and even prints. In a healthcare environment or medical or science lab, vinyl might not be enough. There are specific vinyl fabrics that can withstand cleaning with bleach solutions to eliminate bacteria and other pathogens. If the furniture needs to sustain heavy-use, then durable engineered fabrics such as Crypton might be an option. The individually treated fibers resist stains, moisture and bacteria. The cost of vinyl will always be less than leather. Leather remains the most desired fabric for executive suites, conference rooms and guest areas – and comes in many different grades. Mesh fabrics also have gained popularity, especially in task chairs. That's because mesh allows airflow to the skin, keeping employees comfortable while the user is seated for long periods of time.

Wood Veneer, Laminates & Metal: Wood veneer furniture has great qualities including appearance & durability. It also comes with a higher price compared to laminate or metal. There is a place and application for each type of material. A wood veneer desk top will be susceptible to scratches or water stains if not properly protected with a desk pad or coasters. A metal filing cabinet will cost considerably less than a wood veneer filing cabinet and still be just as functional. Sometimes an added feature of a wood back with a cushion seat can offer a strikingly appealing look with comfort and a practical price for a guest chair. Such as the side chairs you might see in Storch Lobby.

A solid wood bench has simplicity yet a classy look such is the case in Laurie Auditorium or in the Art Music Building. Laminates, like the vinyl material has also come a long way over the years and can fit in many applications. A good quality laminate from a reputable manufacturer can go a long way and fit a tight budget.

V. Products Rated for the Task

There is a goal to standardize some of the university's furniture buying; however there is also a priority in getting a comfortable fit to accommodate individuals of all shapes and sizes. Most desk chairs are rated for use by individuals weighting up to an average of 250 pounds. Anything over, could lead to serious problems. Choosing an incorrectly rated item can result in costly damage to the chair, and more importantly, injury to the person sitting in it. Any savings realized by purchasing a lower-rated chair would be far exceeded by the cost of the liability to the person injured. Since we each have unique body types, buying desks chairs and lobby furniture takes a little more effort.

VI. Choosing Price Over Value

Everyone loves a bargain, but when evaluating price, make sure you give equal weight to value. To make the smartest buying decision possible, consider the cost of ownership over the expected life of the furniture. For example; a chair that's designed for occasional use will generally cost less than one that's designed to withstand heavy wear and tear. While it may be tempting to purchase the lower-priced chair, that would be a mistake, if the chair will receive heavy use. It is recommended that chairs purchased should have at least a 5 year warranty. Repairs and replacements could easily cancel out any initial savings and could even make the product more costly over time. There are occasions, of course, when you must purchase an inexpensive item to "make do" in an emergency or "temporary situation". Such is the case when the university has buildings under construction. In that case, consider that the item(s) will eventually end up in surplus and factor in a more suitable replacement in your budget planning as soon as it is economically feasible.

VII. Buying Furniture with Future Growth in Mind

When adding furniture due to expansion, take into account how every piece will fit into the current and future environment. Explore the entire line to see what you may be able to do long-term, even if only a portion of the project can be funded this year and possibly phase in the remainder on the next budget request.

Consider how furniture will adapt to technology. Technology has changed considerably in the past 10 years and how we buy furniture. Today, desks need space and outlets for laptops, monitors, printers, PDAs, mobile phone chargers, printers, task lights and more. It is important to think about what space and storage will be needed in the future. Such as; does the furniture have wire management or will the conference room accommodate video conferencing?

Keep the workplace flexible. It's a good idea to select furniture that can be easily moved and reconfigured as new needs arise. This allows the flexibility to change a floor plan as necessary. With wireless networks and technology becoming more popular, specific workspaces may eventually not be a requirement. In some offices and classrooms desks or tables are on wheels. The university has several outlets located on the floors. This encourages groupings for projects in team work either in the classroom or work environments.

VIII. Coordinating the Product's Life Expectancy with Accounting Department's Depreciation Schedule

Trinity University's accounting department depreciates major furniture purchases (\$1000+) over a 10 year period. This is a good reason to evaluate the furniture warranty. Furniture purchased with less than a 10 year warranty will quickly grow out of sync with our accounting practice.

IX. Evaluating the True Cost of Ownership

The base price of furniture is just the starting point. In order to fully evaluate true cost of ownership additional items such as freight charges, installation, special handling required, design fees and installation. Even the term "Delivered Price" can mean many things. Will the shipment only be delivered to our loading dock? This is often called, drop ship. In most situations, this is the preferred method. However, furniture may need to be assembled onsite. This needs to be confirmed in the final quote. This is called inside delivery.

It's important to factor all of these items into the total cost while making a purchasing decision. Review and compare warranties as well. Hopefully, the warranty will never be needed but if so, it's good to know upfront exactly what is covered, and for how long. Let the vendor know if you are pricing for budget purposes or if you will be purchasing right away. Sometimes quotes are only valid for 30 days. If planning in advance for purchase in the future, a vendor may need to add a contingency in order to cover any potential manufacturer price increases.

Trinity University is also a member of several purchasing cooperatives such as; Educational & Institutional (E&I), Buy Board, U.S. Community, The Cooperative Purchasing Network (TCPN). These organizations offer its members 100's of competitively solicited contracts as a result of partnerships with industry-leading suppliers. These alliances enable us to maximize our purchasing power. It is very beneficial to ask the vendors if they honor these types of contracts and compare their discount pricing to the cooperative contract pricing.

X. Asking Dealer to Keep Standards on File

Once furniture has been purchased according to approved specifications; like a task chair, fabric type, color, ergonomic features, etc., sales representative can set the item number as a Trinity University standard. By keeping standards on file, the vendor will automatically know that “ask chair” really means a “executive synchro-tilt task chair in #37 Navy Fabric with a 12-position height-adjustable back and pneumatic seat adjustment, rated for up to 350 pounds. Not only will this help ensure that the new item matches current furniture, but it will save everyone involved valuable time as well.

XI. Doing Business with a Vendor that Offers Support After the Sale

Most vendors will be attentive to a customer’s needs while they’re in the process of submitting proposals and quotes. The customer service is just as relevant after the sale. Properly assessing how a company’s sales representatives handle warranty service and other satisfaction-related issues can eliminate headaches down the line. It’s a good idea to ask questions such as “how will you handle warranty repairs?” or “what if the desk becomes scratched in shipping?” Ask for references to find out the reality of how warranty, delivery & install issues were processed. Without the local representative’s service and support, something as simple as returning a small side table with a broken leg can become costly and time-consuming.

*Sources Referenced: 2010 Office Furniture USA catalog, E&I Website