



Risk Registers: A Strategic Tool for Higher Ed Facilities and Utilities Directors

Facilities and Utilities Directors face unprecedented challenges in today's complex higher education landscape. Aging infrastructure, limited budgets, evolving regulatory requirements, rising energy costs, and increasing sustainability expectations create a perfect storm of operational risks. Add the unique pressures of supporting academic missions, research activities, and student experiences, and the need for systematic risk management becomes clear.

The Hidden Risks Beneath Campus Operations

Consider these scenarios:

- A critical chiller failure during final exams disrupts classes and research
- A power outage affects sensitive laboratory equipment, destroying years of research
- A water main break floods a historic building, damaging valuable archives
- A deferred maintenance backlog leads to cascading system failures across campus
- A compliance violation results in significant fines and reputational damage

These aren't hypothetical situations—they're real challenges higher education facility leaders face. The question isn't whether risks exist but how effectively we identify, assess, and manage them.

Enter the Risk Register: More Than Just Documentation

A risk register is a systematic inventory of potential risks, their assessment, and mitigation strategies. But for higher education facilities professionals, it's much more than a compliance document—it's a powerful decision-making tool that transforms reactive management into strategic stewardship.

Why Higher Ed Facilities Directors Need Risk Registers

1. **Transparent Resource Allocation-** In an environment of competing priorities and limited resources, how do you justify budget requests for preventive maintenance, system upgrades, or emergency reserves? A well-maintained risk register provides data-driven evidence of critical vulnerabilities, helping leadership understand the potential consequences of deferred investments.
2. **Enhanced Stakeholder Communication-** Higher education involves diverse stakeholders—administrators, faculty, students, researchers, and governing boards—often with different priorities. A risk register translates technical infrastructure concerns into business impacts that non-technical stakeholders can understand, bridging the communication gap between facilities teams and campus leadership.
3. **Institutional Knowledge Preservation-** Higher education institutions often rely on long-tenured staff with irreplaceable institutional knowledge. A detailed risk register centralizes knowledge about system vulnerabilities, past problems, and mitigation plans, preventing data loss during staff changes.
4. **Strategic Planning Support-** Campus master plans and capital improvements require substantial investments. Risk assessments provide crucial data for long-term planning, helping prioritize projects that reduce critical vulnerabilities while supporting institutional goals.
5. **Emergency Preparedness Enhancement-** From natural disasters to utility failures, campuses must prepare for diverse emergency scenarios. A risk register identifies potential failure points, enabling more effective emergency response planning and business continuity strategies.

Implementing a Risk Register in a Higher Ed Setting

Start with Critical Systems

Begin by focusing on systems that directly support the institution's core mission:

- Central utility plants
- Research infrastructure
- Emergency power systems
- Life safety systems
- Critical IT infrastructure supporting facilities

Use Multi-Dimensional Assessment

Unlike corporate environments, higher education facilities must consider impacts across multiple dimensions:

- Research continuity
- Academic operations
- Student experience
- Regulatory compliance
- Institutional reputation
- Financial implications
- Health and safety

Engage Cross-Functional Stakeholders

Effective risk identification requires diverse perspectives:

- Facilities maintenance teams
- Energy managers
- Campus planning
- Environmental health and safety
- Research operations
- IT infrastructure
- Emergency management

Integrate with Existing Systems

Connect your risk register with:

- Capital planning processes
- Deferred maintenance tracking
- Work order systems
- Asset management programs
- Preventive maintenance schedules
- Emergency response protocols

Real-World Success Stories

Case Study: Major Research University

A large research institution implemented a comprehensive risk register after experiencing a catastrophic chiller failure that damaged sensitive research. Using their risk assessment data, they:

- Secured a \$3.2M funding increase for critical system redundancy
- Prioritized capital renewal based on quantified risk exposure
- Developed improved emergency protocols for research infrastructure
- Created a 10-year utility master plan informed by risk assessments

- Reduced research-impacting outages by 73% over three years

Case Study: Small Liberal Arts College

With limited resources and aging infrastructure, a small college implemented a targeted risk register focusing on its most critical vulnerabilities. The results:

- Identified single points of failure in aging electrical distribution
- Secured grant funding by demonstrating critical infrastructure needs
- Developed a phased implementation of backup systems
- Created emergency response procedures for high-risk scenarios
- Aligned limited capital spending with the highest-risk reduction opportunities

Getting Started

Begin your risk management journey with these steps:

1. **Start Small:** Focus on one critical system or building
2. **Use Structured Workshops:** Gather diverse stakeholders for facilitated risk identification
3. **Create Simple Assessment Criteria:** Develop rating scales relevant to your campus context
4. **Prioritize Ruthlessly:** Focus initial efforts on critical/high risks with significant impacts
5. **Demonstrate Early Value:** Use the register to inform a visible decision or improvement
6. **Build Gradually:** Expand scope as the process demonstrates value

Conclusion

In the complex world of higher education facilities management, a structured approach to risk management isn't just good practice—it's essential for effective stewardship of institutional resources. A well-implemented risk register transforms reactive crisis management into proactive risk mitigation, aligns technical priorities with institutional mission, and builds crucial support for infrastructure investments.

The most valuable aspect isn't the document but the systematic thinking, cross-functional collaboration, and strategic decision-making it enables. For facilities leaders navigating competing priorities with limited resources, a risk register isn't just another administrative tool—it's a strategic asset that protects your institution's mission, resources, and reputation.

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