UCLA Sustainability Action Research

2024 SAR Plastic Policy Investigation Team

Evaluating Plastic Policy Compliance at UCLA Events

Sustainability Action Research
Final Report

Team Co-Leaders: Rachel Minden, Gianna Wright

Team Members: Andres Elizarraras, Fiorella Hunter, Erika Patel, Arushi Somani

Stakeholder: Christophe LaBelle - Sustainability Analyst, UCLA Sustainability Office

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Abstract

Despite an increase in university policies aiming to reduce single-use plastic consumption, there is limited data on the efficacy and enforcement of such initiatives. Our team's project is centered on the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Policy, subsequently referred to as the SUP Policy or Policy, which went into effect in 2020 with the goal of transitioning away from single-use plastic products in favor of more sustainable alternatives. To narrow the scope of our project, our research specifically focuses on plastic usage at campus events, a sector with little existing compliance data. Our project aims to evaluate compliance with the Policy at UCLA events by answering two guiding research questions: **What are current compliance levels with the Policy at campus events? What barriers do staff and student event planners face regarding Policy compliance?** In answering these questions, our goal is to determine which methods would most effectively increase Policy compliance and improve educational communications with campus event planners.

Over the past two quarters, our team interviewed prominent figures involved in UCLA sustainability and events to gain a baseline understanding of the current Policy landscape, conducted audits of 25 events on campus to map compliance levels, and distributed a survey to event planners to gather their perspectives and attitudes regarding Policy implementation. Given the continued use of non-compliant single-use plastic products at events, our methods revealed that the Policy is insufficiently enforced at events and UCLA is not meeting the original goals laid out in the Policy. Additionally, survey responses highlighted the importance of clear, educational Policy outreach and the need for more convenient, streamlined alternatives to single-use plastic products.

Introduction

While universities across the United States are increasingly implementing policies committed to phasing out the usage of single-use plastics, there remains limited data on the efficacy or enforcement of such policies. In response to pressure from the student-led organization CALPIRG, UCLA enacted its Single-Use Plastic Policy (SUP Policy) in 2020 with the intention of phasing out single-use plastics by 2023 (UCLA Administrative Policies and Procedures, 2020). The Policy aims to reduce the quantity of single-use plastic products sold, purchased, and distributed on campus by banning specific plastic products and encouraging a transition towards reusable or compostable alternatives. The ban specifically prohibits plastic beverage bottles, foodware items, pre-packaged meals, and several other products. However, as with other universities, UCLA does not currently have effective methods to track or enforce campus-wide compliance with the SUP Policy, partially due to the scale of the Policy and siloed, complex structure of the campus. Past Sustainability Action Research (SAR) projects have focused exclusively on the presence of plastics in UCLA Dining facilities; as a result, there is a lack of data on other areas of campus.

Our project addresses these information gaps by specifically evaluating compliance with the Policy at events on UCLA's main campus. To answer our first research question – *What are current compliance levels with the Policy at UCLA events?* – we quantified the amounts of each type of single-use plastic product most commonly found at events and assessed the types of events experiencing the most Policy violations. Our second research question – *What barriers do event planners face regarding Policy compliance?* – was addressed by obtaining qualitative feedback from staff and student event planners regarding their underlying reasons for noncompliance. Our ultimate research intentions were to determine the most efficacious methods to both track and enforce Policy compliance at events and to facilitate event organizers' transition away from single-use plastics.

Through our investigation, we hope to make note of the Single-Use Plastic Policy's successes and its ongoing challenges. A thorough analysis of the information gathered through our interviews, event audits, and event planner survey will reveal how Policy implementation can be improved moving forward. Our team will discuss the significance and relevance of our results, ultimately supplying resources and recommendations to the Sustainability Office with the goal of achieving complete compliance with the SUP Policy across all campus events.

Methodology

Informational Interviews

To gather background information, our team conducted a series of informational interviews with individuals across several UCLA departments (See Appendix A). Our goal was to understand both the sustainability and event planning perspectives regarding noncompliance with the SUP Policy at events. We initially interviewed individuals involved with campus sustainability and waste reduction to gauge the effectiveness of the SUP Policy and discern its specific successes and failures. To ensure a more inclusive comprehension of compliance issues and prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), our team also interviewed UCLA event coordinators across different campus departments. Our objectives were to identify their general attitudes toward the Policy and gain a better understanding of event logistics and compliance barriers. After the interviewing period, we made necessary adjustments to our event audit rubric and developed our organizer survey questions in accordance with the experiences and suggestions of our interviewees.

Event Audits

In order to assess compliance with the SUP Policy at UCLA events, our team audited various public events on campus to record the types and quantities of plastics present. During Weeks 1-7 of the Spring Quarter, our team selected three to five random events per week to audit (see Appendix C). Events were obtained from the online UCLA Community Calendar using a random number generator, which allowed our team to create a random sample of events to represent the greater, more diverse group of campus events and their varied plastic usage. In addition to randomly chosen events, our team members selected at least two events per week that we were interested in auditing. Events that members of our team happened to encounter were audited as well. These selected events were primarily chosen because our team determined that they would contain some form of item distribution

or other relevant data– a conclusion based on the advertised food, gifts, prizes, and more. This ensured that, in a scenario where a majority of randomly selected events did not distribute or otherwise use any items, thus producing little data, our selected audits would still allow us to assess campus-wide compliance with the SUP Policy. Additionally, since many students may not routinely check the online Community Calendar when deciding which events to attend, observing selected events allowed our team to include a broader sample that is more representative of events an average UCLA student may encounter during their time on campus.

When conducting event audits, one to two team members actively documented plastic amenities using a standardized audit rubric that categorized plastics under several umbrella terms (See Appendix B). On this rubric, our team members also made note of any suggestions and improvements event coordinators could incorporate into future venues. For optimal data collection, our team followed standardized protocols (See Appendix D). Mapping the scale and frequency of SUP Policy violations at campus events informed our recommendations for continued Policy tracking and alternative sustainable products (See Appendix E).

The audits allowed us to observe any gaps in Policy adherence and to note where the Policy was being successfully implemented to promote sustainability on campus. Recording the presence of plastics, sustainable alternatives, and overall trends enabled our team to make informed recommendations on how best to enforce the SUP Policy and ease implementation barriers.

Event Organizer Survey

Since one of our primary project objectives was to investigate Policy compliance barriers, we created a survey to better understand event planners' knowledge of the Policy and the challenges they face regarding implementation. The survey specifically targeted event planners since these individuals work directly with the Policy. Gathering their

perspectives ensured that our final deliverables equitably addressed the challenges they encounter regarding Policy implementation.

We ascertained roughly 60 event planner contacts by filtering the UCLA campus directory for individuals with job titles that include the word “events.” Our stakeholder, Christophe LaBelle, distributed our survey through the Student Sustainability Leadership Council and the cross-campus Sustainability Liaisons e-mailing lists. Additionally, several of our interviewees provided a list of contacts, while others agreed to distribute our survey to student organizations in the Anderson School of Management and in the UCLA Student Organizations, Leadership, & Engagement (SOLE) Office. Our team sought to incorporate EDI by sending the survey to event planners across various schools, departments, and organizations with the intention of gathering a holistic representation of the diverse perspectives held across campus.

Our team created the survey in Google Forms and distributed it via email during Week 4 of the Spring Quarter. In order to increase the quantity of survey responses, follow-up emails were sent during Week 5. Survey questions were informed by the observed gaps between Policy requirements and current practices, as well as a number of potential solutions expressed during several informant interviews. The questions focused on determining familiarity with the Policy, understanding important purchasing factors and compliance barriers, and gauging event planners’ interest in proposed methods to ease implementation (See Appendix F for question specifics).

Our team designed questions to assess knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding the Policy. To manage bias, questions were carefully phrased so as not to criticize noncompliance, yet still provide a nuanced understanding of implementation levels and barriers. Questions were also reviewed by expert Dr. Carl Maida. Finally, understanding that some individuals may feel hesitant to answer honestly about compliance issues, respondents remained completely anonymous and were informed of their anonymity at the beginning of the survey.

Challenges

Our team faced several challenges throughout our research process due to the broad scope of the SUP Policy and the decentralized nature of event planning at UCLA. One of our initial hurdles was narrowing our project focus to a manageable and impactful area. With a campus population of approximately 84,000 people and over 140 different departments, investigating campus-wide compliance with the Policy proved infeasible within our research timeline and team size. After considering a focus on compliance in ASUCLA's cafes, restaurants, and off-campus franchises, we discovered that their vendor contracts do not require 3rd-party compliance with the SUP Policy unless explicitly stated in their contract, which would limit our team's ability to initiate changes in this sector. Ultimately, we decided to focus on events hosted by various campus departments and student organizations, as this would be within our scope and allow us to gather data on a diverse range of compliance levels and barriers.

Another significant challenge we encountered was the lack of existing compliance data, such as information on the most commonly used plastics, where and how frequently violations occur, and reasons for noncompliance. To overcome this obstacle, we collected our own data through event audits and surveys. However, the decentralized nature of event planning at UCLA posed additional difficulties. With numerous groups planning events, including campus departments, ASUCLA Catering, UCLA Dining, the Events Office, student organizations, and Residential Life, it would not have been possible to track and attend all events. To address this issue, we chose to focus specifically on events listed on the UCLA Community Calendar, as it provided a centralized location for event information.

Despite this targeted approach, we still faced data collection challenges during the Spring Quarter. Some events were restricted, difficult to find information on, or canceled, which hindered our ability to audit them. Furthermore, our small team size meant that we

could only attend events that fit into our individual schedules, which excluded certain randomly selected events. To compensate for these limitations, we made efforts to attend additional selected events beyond our initial random sample.

Distributing our survey to event planners also proved challenging due to the independent nature of each department's event planning at UCLA. To address this obstacle, the survey was distributed through a variety of different avenues, as mentioned in our methodology. Still, it is possible that our list was not comprehensive, especially since some individuals may plan events but not have the term specified in their job title.

While these challenges required our team to adapt and find creative solutions throughout the research process, we remained committed to gathering extensive data on SUP Policy compliance at UCLA events. By focusing our efforts, collecting our own data, and utilizing available resources and contacts, we were able to overcome the aforementioned obstacles and gather valuable insights to inform our recommendations for improving compliance and reducing single-use plastic waste on campus.

Results

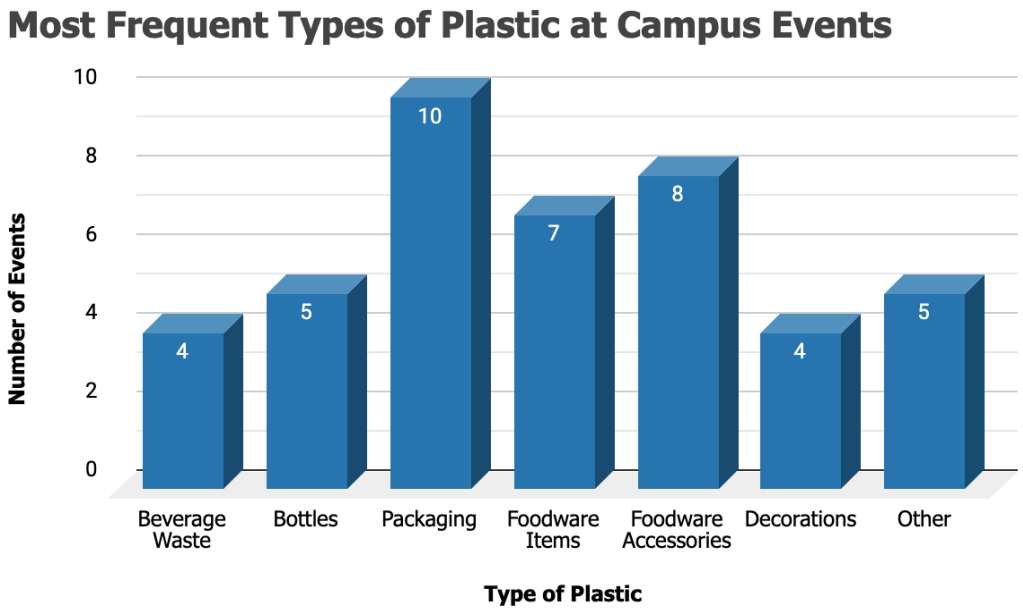
Audit Results

Our team conducted a total of 25 audits, 14 of which were randomly chosen (random event group) and 11 of which were purposefully selected (selected event group). After our audits were fully completed, events were categorized as either: Socials; Workshops & Presentations; Recreation, Arts, & Athletics; or Dining. The data from each audit were also condensed into two Google Sheets, separating random or selected events, and cleaned for easier analysis. Due to the extended duration and varying sizes of these events, specific counts of the recorded products and the observed number of attendees were only estimated. Our analysis will not focus on these particular estimates, as the data produced likely does not encompass the entirety of each event.

When assessing all 25 events, we observed that 76% contained some form of single-use plastic. The remaining 24% were plastic-free and consisted of socials, athletics, workshops, lectures, and presentations with no distributed amenities. Events with food or catering generally require more materials such as serving utensils, dining materials such as plates, cups, and utensils, and foodware accessories such as creamer pods or condiment packets. For this reason, our team predicted that it would be more likely for events with food to contain single-use plastic. After our audits were completed, our team found that out of the 16 events that had food present, 81% contained single-use plastic. We attributed this finding to the fact that event planners either bought plastic products related to food and beverages themselves, or utilized caterers that provided these products.

Upon totaling and categorizing the single-use plastics we recorded across all events, plastic packaging was the most commonly observed type of plastic, followed by foodware items and foodware accessories (see Graph 1). Foodware accessories refer to products like

utensils and individually wrapped condiment containers, while foodware items include products like plates, bowls, and containers. This data supports the predicted positive correlation between food at events and the amount of single-use plastic present. Not only does catered food often arrive in plastic containers or packaging, but the presence of food at events requires additional materials that are commonly plastic. Our team noticed that social events where food was served or readily available had the highest amount of single-use plastic. All five of the Dining events had single-use plastics that were openly available or distributed to the attendees. In addition to the dining events, there were five Social events that also distributed food and beverages with single-use plastic materials. Thus, we decided to ensure our proposed solutions specifically targeted this correlation.



Graph 1: Most frequent types of single-use plastic products observed across all audited events.

Any products that were metal, cloth, paper, cardboard, wood, bamboo, or otherwise labeled as compostable were considered sustainable alternatives (SAs) to single-use plastics. The presence of SAs was recorded for each item category on our rubric. Seven of the 14

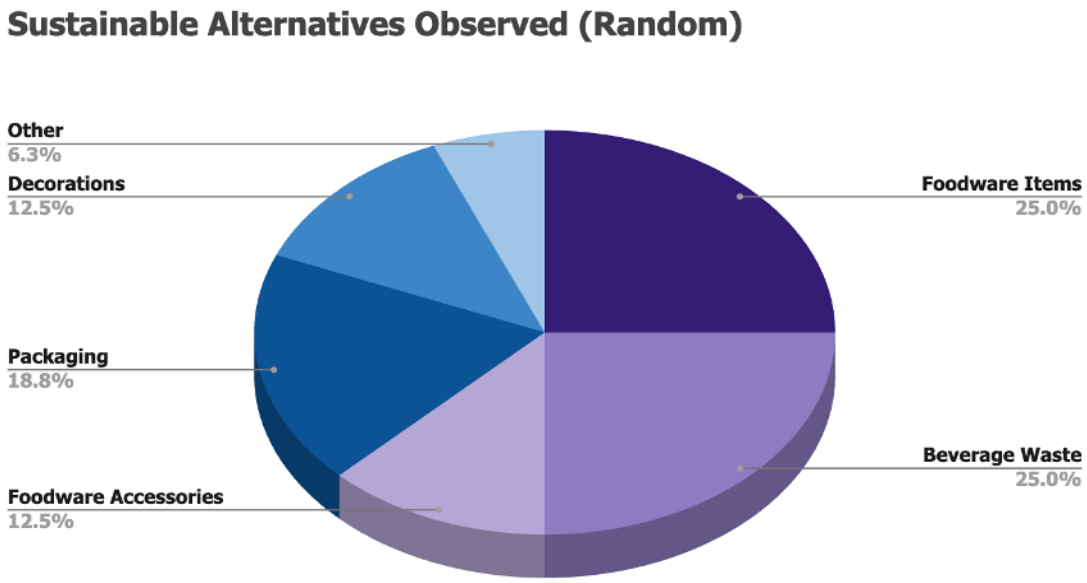
random events and 10 of the 11 selected events contained SAs for one or more item categories. 85.7% of these random events and 70% of these selected events used or distributed multiple types of SAs. This suggests that when organizers involve one type of SA in their events, SAs for other event item categories are likely to be present as well. Of the 25 total events, the most common SA categories recorded were Foodware Items at 44% of events, Beverage Waste at 28% of events, and Packaging at 20% of events. Additionally, SAs were recorded at 83.3% of the Workshops & Presentations events, 80% of the Dining events, 60% of the Recreation, Arts & Athletics events, and 55.5% of the Social events.

Our team recorded two random events and one selected event that contained zero single-use plastics and only used or distributed SAs. The randomly chosen Botany Brown Bag event did not distribute any amenities or use any general event items beyond a singular chalkboard sign to advertise the event. However, the complete absence of single-use plastics at the other two events remains uncertain. The randomly chosen Career Week Kick Off Party, Treasure Hunt, and Games event distributed plastic giveaway items and contained decorations that were plastic, however, it was unclear if these decorations were single-use or were to be reused for future events. The selected Self Care for Caregivers Luncheon event was inaccessible to our team and observations were made from afar, thus, the presence of single-use plastics at this event remained a possibility.

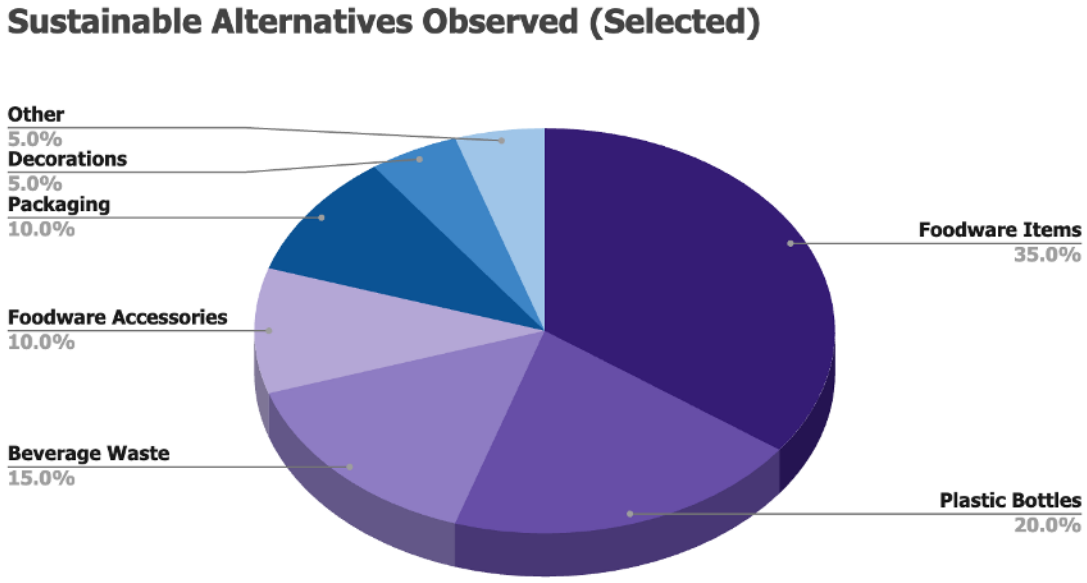
The specific sources of SAs were also recorded when possible. Compostable spoons with compostable wrapping from World Centric were observed at the Tipuana Adopt A Plant event. Catered cardboard beverage cartons, paper cups, and cardboard food packaging were observed at the UCLA Black Alumni Association Brunch event from Noah's NY Bagels, at the Coffee & Breakfast at Dashew event from La Monarca Bakery, and at the Celebrate EUDAIMONIA event from Corner Bakery. However, each of these caterers provided separate single-use plastic products alongside the SAs, such as plastic condiment containers or utensils. Furthermore, portions of certain alternatives contained plastic, such as the

cardboard beverage cartons with plastic spouts and caps observed at these three events (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sustainable alternatives and single-use plastics observed at the UCLA Black Alumni Association Brunch event.



Graph 2: Categories of SAs observed at random event audits



Graph 3: Categories of SAs observed at selected event audits.

Despite the small sample sizes, the random and selected events produced similar data regarding SA usage. The relative proportions of different SA item categories appear to be similar for both event groups, which can suggest that our results are fairly representative of campus events. 62.5% of the SAs found at random events and 80% of the SAs found at selected events were related to food or beverage ware, shown in purple in Graph 2 and Graph 3 respectively. The remaining 37.5% of the SAs found at random events and 20% of the SAs found at selected events were related to more general event item usage, shown in blue. The most notable difference between the two groups is an absence of plastic bottle SAs at the random events, while plastic bottle SAs comprised 25% of the SAs for the selected events.

Our team documented SUP Policy violations and other waste-related issues during our audits and formulated event-specific suggestions based on these observations. Several of these recommendations pertained to the materials used for catered food. While the plastics involved in these instances were not directly the fault of event organizers, our suggestions involved purchasing from vendors who use non-plastic or compostable materials. Several of these catered events, such as the Coffee and Breakfast at Dashew, also distributed individually packaged items including coffee creamers and condiment containers, that otherwise could have been distributed in larger communal containers to generally reduce plastic waste. We also recorded several instances of plastic or laminated signage, such as the MLK Oratorical event, and we recommended that these signs could either be printed on cardboard or shown on available TV screens at the venue. Additionally, our team observed that the frequent lack of water refill stations and tri-stream waste bins could hinder the success of individuals' own sustainability efforts.

Implications of Audits for Policy Implementation

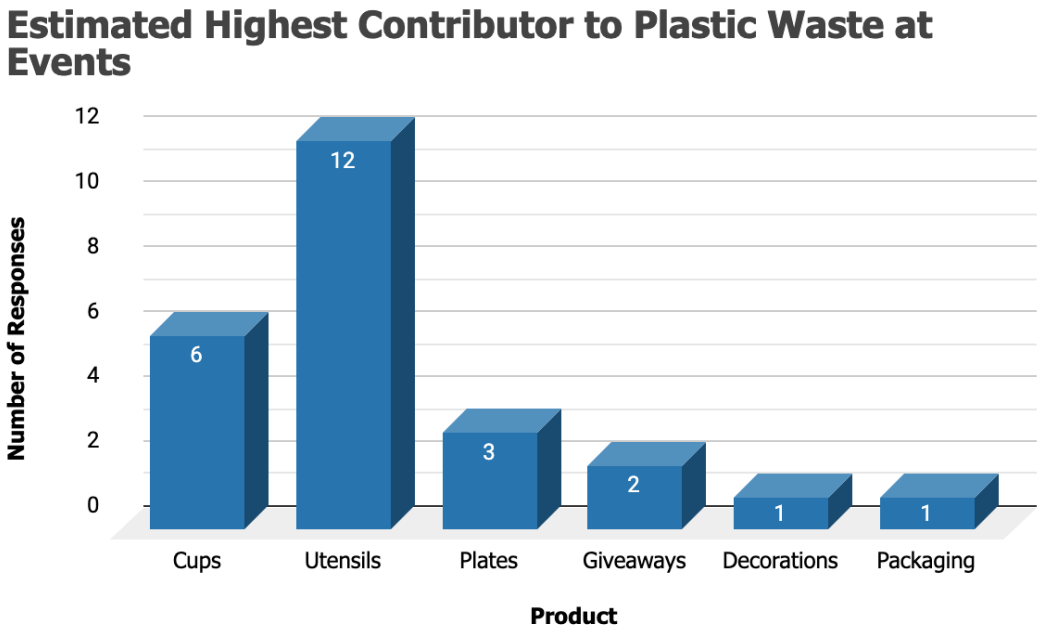
Our team concluded that increased event planner education and support could remedy some of these frequently recorded issues. Several of the observed violations could be rectified if planners were more aware of the specifics of the SUP Policy and the ways in which single-use plastics may be unknowingly used in their event materials. However, one of the main remaining issues is that event planners have little control over the materials provided

by their caterers, which often include some form of single-use plastic, even if the majority of the provided materials are compostable/biodegradable. Current campus infrastructure, including the sparse amount of water refill stations and the size and availability of tri-stream waste bins, also seems to be a somewhat significant detriment towards efforts to fully commit to SAs. Coordinated efforts by event planners, catering services, and UCLA Sustainability could address these violations. To gather more insights into the reasoning behind our audit findings, our team conducted a survey to understand event planners' perspectives on the SUP Policy and their incorporation of single-use plastics at events.

Survey Results

Background

In the first section of the survey, we gathered information about our respondents' affiliation with UCLA events, event size, the frequency of food at these events, vendors used, and types of plastics most commonly used. Of our 28 respondents, 17 were staff, seven were graduate students, three were undergraduate students, and one was a faculty member. We found that staff-organized events typically utilize catering more than student organizations. When asked to list which catering services they commonly use at events, UCLA-affiliated services like ASUCLA Catering and UCLA Catering were by far the most common. Among the 26 respondents who indicated that they utilize catering, 17 specifically listed ASUCLA Catering, UCLA Catering, or both. ASUCLA Catering is organized by Associated Students UCLA and allows clients to select from an online menu. Under ASUCLA's sustainability section, they outline that an equipment fee will be added for any unreturned equipment in efforts to minimize waste (ASUCLA, n.d.). UCLA Catering is organized by UCLA Conferences & Catering which offers online menu options or the opportunity to create a custom menu. UCLA Conferences & Catering ensures that all catering orders are delivered in 100% compostable containers (UCLA Conferences & Catering, n.d.).



Graph 4 - Question: Please write which of the above products (if applicable) you would estimate contributes the most single-use plastic waste at your events

As shown in Graph 4, we asked respondents to list which plastic products they believed contributed the most to overall levels of plastic waste at their events. Utensils were most commonly reported as significant waste contributors while packaging was reported least often. However, upon comparing these results with our team's audits, we found that there were discrepancies in the quantity of plastic packaging reported. Data from our audits suggested that packaging was the most commonly observed single-use plastic. This discrepancy could be attributed to the fact that packaging is often handled behind-the-scenes for events, and that event organizers may not have full knowledge of the quantity or presence of plastic packaging. Furthermore, there may be a psychological tendency to focus on products that are physically used during events rather than those used for storing/wrapping materials when asked about plastic usage.

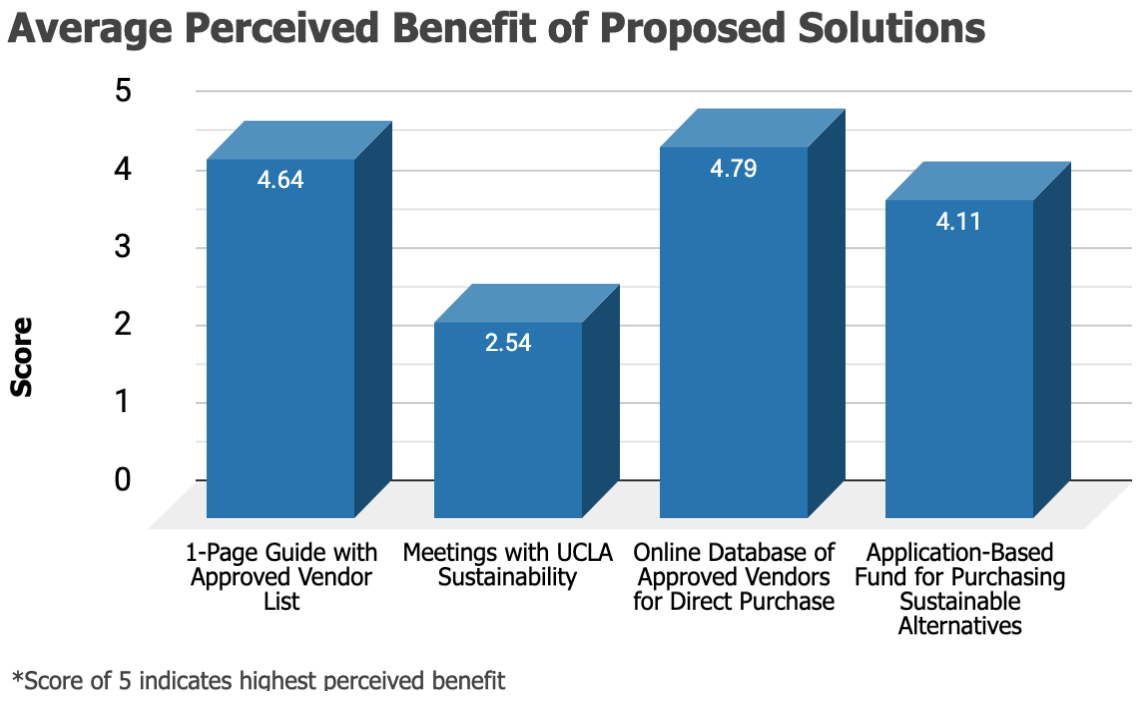
Knowledge Assessment

Our survey respondents encompassed a range of demographics, including official UCLA event planners and individuals who plan events infrequently and on a discretionary basis as a secondary responsibility of their campus role. This distinction likely contributed to the different attitudes and existing Policy knowledge expressed by our respondents. Our survey results showed that staff and faculty members have more knowledge about specific guidelines in the Single-Use Plastics Policy Implementation Guide and that they have received more extensive information about the SUP Policy than students. When asked where they had first heard of the SUP Policy, 50% of student respondents indicated that they had never heard of the SUP Policy prior to taking the survey, while only 24% of staff respondents responded similarly. Staff stated their SUP Policy knowledge came from other staff members, departmental directors, and the UCLA Sustainability Office. In contrast, most students reported more limited SUP Policy knowledge, and that they were primarily informed by emails and sustainability newsletters. This distinction could be attributed to the fact that student organizations experience higher rates of turnover than staff positions, which limits the number of encounters that can be made with the SUP Policy.

When asked if they had been provided sufficient information on how to properly comply with the UCLA Single Use Plastics Policy, 7.1% of respondents strongly disagreed, 32.1% disagreed, 21.4% were neutral, and the remaining 39.3% strongly agreed or agreed. 64.7% percent of respondents stated that they consider the SUP Policy when planning their events while 60.7% of respondents reported that they would like more information on ensuring their events are compliant with the Policy. However, when asked if they are confident in their ability to access and purchase sustainable alternatives, 60.7% of event planners responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These results demonstrate that there have been some educational efforts on Policy guidelines and that most event organizers are mindful of the Policy in the event planning process, but that there are still barriers to achieving a complete transition away from single-use plastics.

Implementation Assessment

When asked what they considered to be the most important factors when purchasing products for events, 89.3% of responses identified cost, making it the highest reported consideration. In second place, 67.9% of respondents indicated that sustainability was an important factor. Moreover, 71.4% of respondents identified the higher price of sustainable alternatives as the biggest challenge to transitioning away from single-use plastic products. Taken together, these results suggest that while many event planners value sustainable principles, cost considerations may ultimately override these values and deter individuals from sustainable purchases. These attitudes indicate that finding cost-effective plastic alternatives should be a high priority for the Sustainability Office to ease SUP Policy compliance implementation for event planners. Given that many student-organized events also have tight budget constraints, reducing cost barriers to sustainable alternatives could greatly reduce the amount of plastic waste at events.



Graph 5 - Question: On a scale of 1-5, how beneficial would each of the following be in helping you comply with the Single-Use Plastics Policy when planning your events? (1 - not helpful, 5 - very helpful)

Additionally, we asked our respondents to rank proposed solutions to ease implementation on a scale of 1-5, with 5 representing the highest benefit, to gauge which resources and solutions would be most beneficial. The top-ranked solutions were a one-pager with approved vendors and an online database of these vendors for direct purchase. These solutions would produce the greatest impact, as catered events have been shown by our audit results to maintain a high correlation with single-use plastics. Graph 5 also indicates favorability for an application-based fund for purchasing sustainable alternatives, which would ease the cost barrier mentioned previously.

Conclusively, our results from both the audits and the survey provided us with enough guidance to form recommendations for transitioning current campus event practices to fully comply with the SUP Policy.

Deliverables

Our results highlight the need for improved materials directed to event planners to both educate them about the Policy and provide them with resources to remove compliance barriers. Our team will be providing our stakeholder with several materials that the Sustainability Office can distribute to event planners in pursuit of these goals. These materials build upon information from existing educational materials utilized by UCLA Sustainability, including the Single-Use Plastics Policy One-Pager for students and student organizations (See Appendix G) (UCLA Sustainability, n.d.). While this existing resource specifically targets students, we intend to create our deliverables primarily for staff event planners, for whom accessible educational materials are less common. Additionally, our deliverables have been created to specifically address the violation data produced from our audits and the education gaps expressed in our survey responses.

First, based on our observations from the event audits, our team formulated a list of recommendations detailing simple steps event planners can take to reduce general plastic usage at their events. These recommendations are intended to be straightforward and

realistic to implement and attempt to mitigate some of the cost and convenience barriers that often deter event planners from reducing plastic consumption. For instance, we suggest that event planners encourage attendees to bring their own reusable water bottles rather than providing plastic bottles or cups at the event. We also recommend that event planners purchase condiments, creamers, and other similar food items in bulk instead of providing individually packaged or wrapped portions as a means to reduce plastic packaging. We compiled these recommendations into an easily digestible one-page infographic that can then be distributed to event planners (See Appendix H).

In an effort to provide event planners with more resources to support their transition to sustainable products, we created a template of an updated, brief implementation guide for event planners that we will send to our stakeholder (See Appendix I). The template was informed by our survey results, in which respondents indicated interest in more information on the Policy and streamlined access to sustainable products and vendors. While the one-pager discussed above provides suggestions for reducing plastic usage, the implementation template will provide event planners with key information about the Policy and direct access to resources. Among these resources would be direct links to purchase sustainable alternatives for the most commonly used single-use plastic products, like utensils, and names of specific vendors that are most compliant with the Policy. Due to the limited timeframe of our project, our team was unable to research all of the specific alternative products and vendors. Thus, the template merely lays out which elements should be included, the actual links to which can be added at a later date. Additionally, the template will link existing resources from the Sustainability Office for individuals who want more detailed information on the Policy and its implementation.

Recommendations

In addition to the materials created for event planners, our team developed a list of recommendations for the Sustainability Office informed by our interviews, event audit observations, and survey responses. These recommendations are broken down into four categories: data collection and compliance monitoring, Policy education, event planner support, and Policy enforcement. We have included our reasoning for each recommendation as well as the potential benefits and feasibility of implementation.

Data Collection and Compliance Monitoring

1. Publicize the Single-Use Plastics Anonymous Reporting Form

While our project provides some level of insight into Policy compliance at campus events, our limited time frame and team size mean that there is still an opportunity to collect compliance data on a larger scale. In order to do so, we recommend that the Sustainability Office increase the publicization of the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Policy Anonymous Reporting Form. Currently, the form is linked in several places on the UCLA Sustainability website. However, low response rates suggest that the Sustainability Office should attempt to utilize additional avenues to advertise the form. For instance, the Office could attempt to partner with various departments on campus, including UCLA Events, to post the link on additional department websites and on QR code signs posted at locations where events commonly occur.

We believe that the Anonymous Reporting Form offers an invaluable resource for UCLA Sustainability to track Policy compliance, as it allows the Office to utilize the broader campus community to report noncompliance in situations in which the UCLA Sustainability team may be unable to observe such violations. More broad publicization could also allow

students, staff, and faculty to become more aware of and more closely involved with the SUP Policy and campus sustainability.

2. Create an Event Compliance Monitoring Student Internship Position

We also recommend the creation of a student internship position within the Sustainability Office, or a related department, to build upon the work done by our team. The internship would operate similarly to our project, and would task a single student or a small group of students with auditing campus events, or other spaces that may be in violation of the Policy, using the materials that our team developed, including our audit rubric and methodology. The intern(s) could also develop a database to track the frequency of noncompliance and at what type of events these violations most commonly occur. A long-term compliance monitoring position would ensure that data on the Policy can be continually collected, and can focus on events that were not included in the scope of our research, including restricted and private events. Our team believes that many students would be interested in an opportunity to get hands-on work in sustainability at UCLA, which would help take the burden of tracking compliance across such a large campus away from UCLA Sustainability staff and allow for greater student involvement in campus sustainability.

Policy Education

1. Policy Reminders and Implementation Resource Redistribution

While informational meetings with UCLA Sustainability to review Policy requirements and implementation strategies were the least favored solution presented to event planners, about 60% of our survey respondents were interested in receiving more information on how to ensure their events comply with the Policy. For this reason, we recommend that the Sustainability Office continue efforts to educate student and staff planners regarding Policy implementation. This could be in the form of monthly emails distributed to major departments across campus that remind event planners about implementation guides, examples of sustainable products, and other resources. This should be a fairly feasible strategy for UCLA Sustainability to implement, given that it requires only re-distributing

existing materials and reminding event planners to contact the Sustainability Office should they need more help complying.

2. Publicize Quick Tips Sheet and One-Page Implementation Guide

In addition to distributing the quick tips sheet and one-page implementation guide to event planners, we recommend that UCLA Sustainability post these resources on its website for greater accessibility and to consolidate all available resources. To reach student organization event planners, these resources could also be posted on the UCLA Sustainability Instagram and placed within the LinkTree for future reference.

Event Planner Support

1. Online Database of Approved Sustainable Vendors and Products

In addition to developing a list of approved sustainable vendors within the implementation guide for event planners, we suggest the creation of an online database with the option to directly purchase from these vendors. Of the solutions proposed to our survey respondents, this was determined to have the highest potential benefit for easing Policy implementation (See Survey Results, Graph 5). The database could be expanded to include options for individual compostable products, such as utensils, which are often provided as single-use plastics by caterers. Constructing this database would require deep research into what local vendors are currently fully compliant with the Policy or would adapt their catering services to comply with the Policy. Given the concerns expressed about sustainable alternatives by survey respondents, cost and durability, comparisons between individual products would need to be conducted to select the most effective yet economical options. These efforts may prove tedious for the Sustainability Office, which is why we later recommend that a future SAR team could work to begin compiling this information. Finally, creating this database would require the expertise of web designers and several focus groups of event planners to test the efficacy of the final product.

2. Sustainable Alternatives Fund

In our informational interviews, interest in a sustainable alternatives fund functioning similarly to The Green Initiative Fund (TGIF) was expressed given the higher cost of non-plastic products. This interest was echoed in our survey results (See Survey Results, Graph 5). The fund would enable event planners to receive financial support in purchasing for their events, and should include an application that requires event planners to provide information about their event, indicate what products and from where they intend to purchase, and explain why they need funding. The fund could operate in conjunction with the Online Database of Approved Sustainable Vendors and Products, where the money event planners receive could be directly transferred towards purchases from the database. Given our limited knowledge of the Sustainability Office's budget or donation base, the feasibility of this recommendation is unclear. Assuming financial feasibility, the Sustainability Office would then need to develop the criteria for application eligibility, design an application and timeline, designate an entity to manage the fund, and set a mechanism for accessing grants. Collaborating with The Green Initiative Fund or mimicking their funding process could be beneficial in streamlining the creation of a sustainable alternatives fund.

Policy Enforcement

1. Target Top Catering Services: ASUCLA and UCLA Catering

Given that ASUCLA and UCLA Catering were identified most frequently by surveyed event planners, and that most catered events that our team audited contained single-use plastics, we recommend that the Sustainability Office assess ASUCLA and UCLA Catering compliance with the Policy. If noncompliance is an issue among these catering services, we recommend that UCLA Sustainability work directly with directors at ASUCLA to address this discrepancy. Setting a clear requirement and deadline for compliance, as well as repercussions for continued noncompliance, would alleviate Policy violations. Furthermore, since the majority of event planners use these catering services, their process of finding sustainable vendors would be eased.

2. Discontinue Reimbursements for Plastics Purchased by Departments

In our informational interviews, Bonny Bentzin mentioned that some plastic purchases are made on employees' personal credit cards and are later reimbursed by UCLA. She also mentioned that the Sustainability Office would like to eliminate these reimbursements of noncompliant products given that single-use plastic products are prohibited under UCLA's SUP Policy. We recommend that the Sustainability Office follow through with this initiative, as it may also function as a deterrent for event planners from purchasing plastic products. This will likely be one of the more difficult recommendations to implement, as it will require the Sustainability Office to gain access to employee purchasing records. This could also put a financial strain on event planners if sustainable alternatives are unable to be purchased, or could heavily increase exemption requests to a potentially unmanageable degree. However, implementation of the sustainable alternatives fund alongside this initiative could alleviate both of these concerns.

Discussion

While previous SAR projects have investigated the Single-Use Plastics Policy, they have focused solely on reducing plastic consumption in UCLA Dining facilities. Our project is the first to consider Policy compliance across campus events, and as such it provides a baseline of information that can inform future initiatives to both map noncompliance and improve Policy implementation. Through our informational interviews and event organizer survey, our team was able to facilitate conversation with a range of UCLA students, staff, and faculty members about initiatives to ease the Policy compliance process. Our event audit observations and survey results suggest that event planners are concerned about sustainability, but that several barriers persist in completely eliminating single-use plastics at events. We concluded that the high presence of plastics observed was most attributable to both the higher cost of compostable alternatives and event planners' limited flexibility to decline plastic products included in catering services. However, our audits also revealed a significant frequency and range of sustainable alternative products, suggesting that it is possible for all campus events to become plastic-free.

As part of our final deliverable, our team compiled a list of recommendations that the Sustainability Office could implement to improve compliance monitoring and ease implementation for event planners. Each recommendation was informed by the perspectives of event planners and Sustainability staff, and includes an analysis of potential benefits and feasibility. This information can enable the Sustainability Office to make informed decisions and develop the most efficacious solutions to address gaps in SUP Policy compliance. In the long term, we hope that our research will streamline the process by which event planners access sustainable alternatives and reduce the frequency of plastic products at campus events.

Project Limitations and Direction for the Sustainability Office

Due to the vastness of UCLA's campus, as well as our team's constraints on time and human resources, we narrowed our investigation to assess compliance at campus events posted on the UCLA Community Calendar. As such, this largely excluded UCLA Health and Residential Life events from our audits. In our meeting with Ella Crowell, we were also informed that we would not be able to observe private or ticketed events such as those at the Anderson School of Management or Luskin School of Public Affairs. This further limited the range of campus events we were able to assess for compliance. In the future, UCLA Sustainability would benefit from researching Policy compliance levels at private events and those outside the Community Calendar to gain a more nuanced understanding of the extent of noncompliance. If this research is undertaken by a future SAR team, we suggest that they develop an early relationship with Anderson and Luskin Directors, or gain access to the events through their stakeholder. We suggest that the team utilize our standardized rubric for quantifying plastic presence at campus events to continue developing a database of the most frequently violating plastics and event types.

Our event planner survey also had a low response rate – only 28 responses out of over 100 contacts – which limited the range of perspectives we were able to gather regarding Policy implementation and compliance barrier mitigation. We suggest that UCLA Sustainability redistribute the survey with increased publicization (via social media, the UCLA Sustainability website, physical QR codes, etc.) and a monetary incentive to encourage responses. A more broad representation of UCLA event planners may reveal new or more favorable strategies to increase Policy implementation than were noted in our recommendations list.

Recommendations for Future SAR Projects

As shown in our survey results, the overwhelming caterers of choice among event planners are ASUCLA and UCLA Catering. As of 2023, the Single-Use Plastics Policy requires all vendors to comply with the Policy guidelines. However, it is unclear whether these two

catering services have completely transitioned away from single-use plastic products. Therefore, we propose that a future SAR team investigate ASUCLA and UCLA Catering's compliance with the Policy. We suggest that the project focus on auditing events catered by ASUCLA and UCLA Catering to better understand what type of single-use plastic products (if any) are being provided. We also recommend that the team reach out to ASUCLA Directors and Catering staff to gather perspectives on the barriers to transitioning away from single-use plastics and the most favorable solutions to ease compliance. Including stakeholders from both ASUCLA and the UCLA Sustainability Office may improve the team's ability to access information necessary to this project.

Based on our audit results, it was evident that many off-campus caterers also provide single-use plastic products to UCLA events. Therefore, we propose that a future SAR team could look into sustainable vendors in the surrounding Westwood area that comply with the UCLA SUP Policy. Future teams could also try to investigate whether purchasing agreements with any of the most popular caterers identified in our survey could be re-negotiated to provide food items in compostable containers or exclude utensils in the purchase. This project could face challenges since it involves working with partners external to UCLA's campus. Additionally, the team could face institutional resistance to establishing new purchasing contracts. We suggest that the Sustainability Office first reach out to some of the most popular off-campus caterers to gauge their interest and see if this project could be feasible.

We hope that the Sustainability Office will carefully consider each of our recommendations when planning initiatives to strengthen SUP Policy compliance across campus. Continuing efforts to monitor Policy compliance and target the largest Policy implementation barriers would enable the Sustainability Office to facilitate sustainability improvements beyond our investigation.

Appendix

Appendix A: Informational Interview Contact List

Name	Title/Role	Interview Date
Jade Goegebuer	UCLA Zero Waste Manager	2/12
Bonny Bentzin	UCLA Deputy Chief Sustainability Officer	2/20
Isabelle Sui	Anderson School MBA Candidate	2/29
Ella Crowell	UCLA Events Office Principal Event Manager	3/7
Veronica Moy	Anderson Central Events Director	3/7
Tammy Borrero	UCLA Luskin School Director of Events	3/11

Appendix B: Audit Rubric

Category	Yes/No	Quantity	Sustainable Alternatives Observed	Comments
Beverage Waste (cups, straws, lids, stirrers)				
Plastic Water Bottles				
Packaging (plastic wrap, bags)				
Foodware Items (bowls, plates, containers)				
Foodware Accessories (utensils, condiment containers)				
Decorations (balloons, confetti, etc.)				
Other				
Reusables				
Compostables				

Metrics		Conclusions
Event Location:		**Recommendations:**
Event Categorization:		
Event Purpose:		
How are plastics distributed:		
Green Event Certification:		
Number of Event Attendees:		**Additional Comments:**
Open Admission:		
Audited by:		
Date:		

Appendix C: Table of Audited Events

Event Title	Date	Random/ Selected	Category	Team Member	Team Member
MLK Oratorical	4/04/24	Random	Workshops & Presentations	Arushi Somani	Gianna Wright
UCLA Black Alumni Association Brunch	4/05/24	Random	Dining	Andres Elizarraras	Gianna Wright
Women's Rugby vs Claremont	04/06/24	Random	Recreation, Arts & Athletics	Erika Patel	Rachel Minden
Hooligan Theater Beauty and the Beast	04/06/24	Selected	Recreation, Arts & Athletics	Rachel Minden	
Already Friends: Deluxe PBJ Party	04/08/24	Selected	Social	Arushi Somani	Fiorella Hunter
Career Week Kick Off Party, Treasure Hunt, and Games	04/08/24	Random	Workshops & Presentations	Arushi Somani	Fiorella Hunter
Transfer Sunset	04/09/24	Selected	Social	Gianna Wright	
Coffee & Breakfast at Dashew	04/10/24	Random	Dining	Erika Patel	Gianna Wright
Burrito Bash	04/11/24	Selected	Dining	Rachel Minden	Andres Elizarraras
Bruin Day (on the Hill)	04/13/24	Selected	Social	Rachel Minden	
Self Care for Caregivers Luncheon	04/15/24	Selected	Social	Erika Patel	
Tipuana Adopt A Plant	04/15/24	Selected	Social	Gianna Wright	
Wheelchair Basketball	04/16/24	Random	Recreation, Arts &	Erika Patel	Andres

			Athletics		Elizarraras
Reflect with RISE	04/16/24	Random	Social	Rachel Minden	Arushi Somani
Hill's Got Talent	04/17/24	Selected	Social	Arushi Somani	
Native Cultural Cuisine Night	04/17/24	Random	Dining	Gianna Wright	Andres Elizarraras
Botany Brown Bag	04/18/24	Random	Workshops & Presentations	Rachel Minden	Gianna Wright
AAP Enrichment Year	04/22/24	Random	Workshops & Presentations	Andres Elizarraras	Gianna Wright
URW Research workshop	04/24/24	Random	Workshops & Presentations	Rachel Minden	Erika Patel
Resilience Building Book Club	04/24/24	Random	Social	Rachel Minden	Andres Elizarraras
Already Friends: Game Night	04/26/2024	Random	Recreation, Arts & Athletics	Andres Elizarraras	
Marschak Colloquium: Naomi Oreskes	04/30/24	Selected	Workshops & Presentations	Rachel Minden	
Celebrate EUDAIMONIA	05/01/24	Random	Social	Rachel Minden	Erika Patel
Women's Tennis: NCAA Round 1	05/03/24	Selected	Recreation, Arts & Athletics	Erika Patel	
Feast BBQ Night	05/09/24	Selected	Dining	Erika Patel	

Appendix D: Audit Methodology Guidelines

When arriving:

- Do not arrive at the very beginning or end of the posted times, as this may affect your results.
- **Independent audits: Record time of arrival.**
- Introduce yourself to the event organizer(s) present.
    - State that you are **observing** various events for your SAR student research team. **Do not** use the word "audit" or suggest that your observations could negatively impact event planners in the future.
- Ask the organizers if any food/drink was or will be catered at any point.
- If there is catered food, try to identify the catering company.

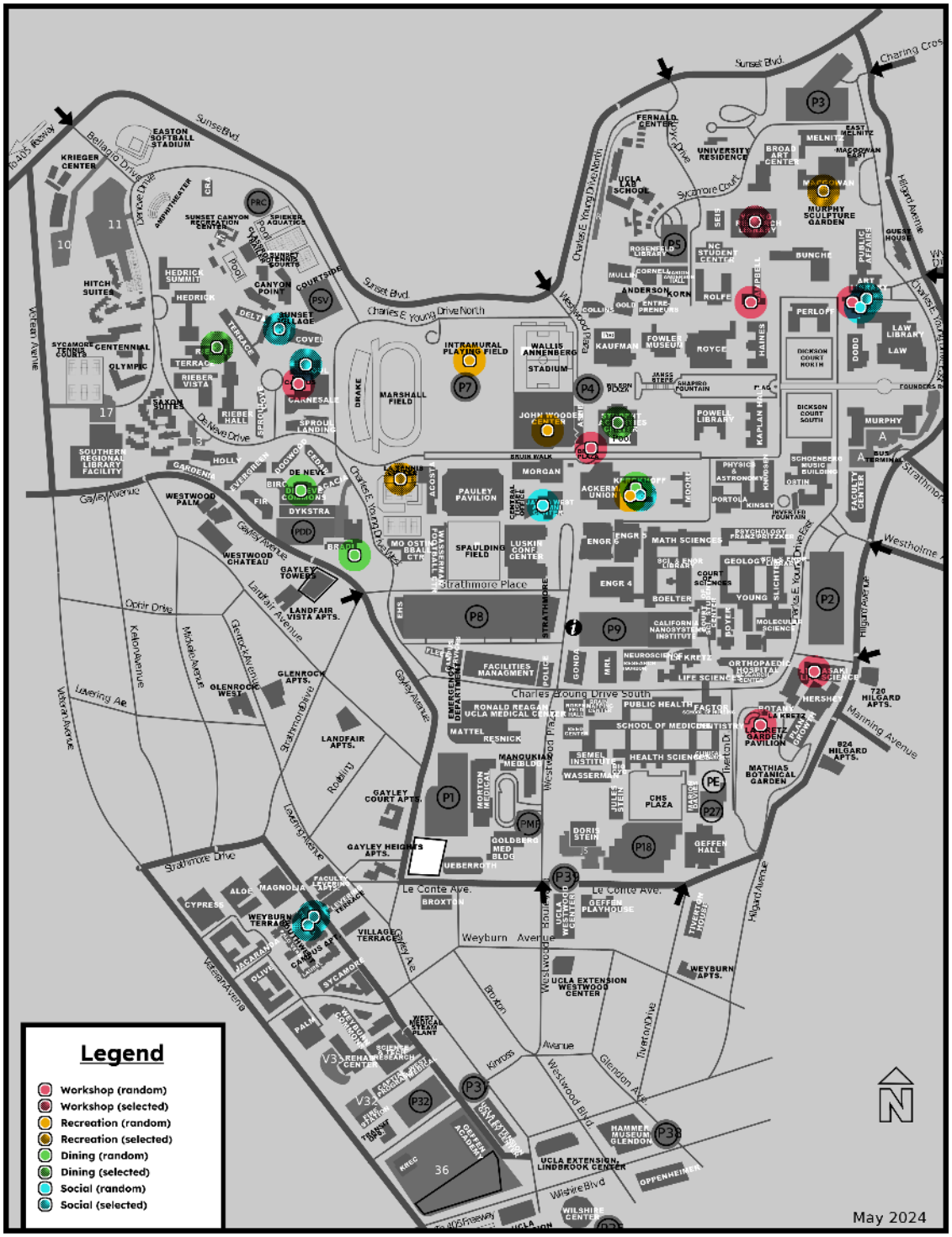
During the audit:

- Remain unobtrusive.
- Walk around the entire area once or twice if possible.
- Take as many pictures as you can.
    - Demonstrate event size, catered food/drink, decorations, activities, etc.
- Keep in mind that anything can be made of plastic, including signage, decorations, etc.
- Depending on the size of the event, observe for 10-30 minutes.

Before leaving:

- Meet with your audit partner (if you have one) to double-check if either of you missed any details.
- Base your recommendations on particular details that you have observed from the audit.
- To ensure no details are forgotten, fill out the rubric fully at the event, do not fill it out at a later time.
- If there is information that you were not able to gather (Green Event certification status, number of attendees, details on all catered food/drink, etc.), describe it in the comments and attempt to gather this information as soon as possible.

Appendix E: Map of Event Audit Locations



Original map from https://map.ucla.edu/downloads/pdf/UCLA_Campus_Colored_Map.pdf

Appendix F: Survey Questions

**Note: The actual survey was distributed via Google Forms. This template details the various sections and questions asked.*

2024 SAR PPI - Survey Template

Introduction: The 2024 Plastic Policy Investigation Sustainability Action Research (SAR) team is looking for insight into the knowledge and implementation of the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Policy among individuals who plan events on campus. Please answer the following questions as they apply to you, keeping in mind that all responses will be **completely anonymous**. Our team will utilize your responses to create recommendations to UCLA Sustainability about which resources will most effectively help event planners across campus achieve compliance with the Single-Use Plastics Policy. We expect this survey to take approximately 5 minutes to complete. We thank you for your time and look forward to hearing your perspectives!

Campus Affiliation (Student Organization, Department, Other)

- ☐ Staff
- ☐ Faculty
- ☐ Undergraduate student
- ☐ Graduate student
- ☐ Other:

Which department do you plan events for? *If you are part of a student organization please write: "Student Organization"* (optional)

Background

What type of events do you typically plan?

- ☐ Public
- ☐ Private
- ☐ Both

What is the average attendance size of the events you plan?

- ☐ Less than 10 people
- ☐ 10-30 people
- ☐ 30-50 people
- ☐ 50-100 people
- ☐ 100+ people
- ☐ Event size varies

How many events (on average) do you plan per academic year?

- ☐ 1-3
- ☐ 4-6
- ☐ 7-10
- ☐ 10+

How frequently do you organize events or activities on campus that involve food or beverage service?

- ☐ Very often
- ☐ Somewhat often
- ☐ Not often
- ☐ Never

If you utilize food/catering, please list which vendors you typically utilize. Type "N/A" if you do not utilize food/catering.

In the past year, my events have included single-use plastic… (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Utensils
- ☐ Cups
- ☐ Water bottles
- ☐ Straws/lids
- ☐ Condiment containers/packets
- ☐ Plates
- ☐ Serving trays
- ☐ Serving utensils
- ☐ Bags, Ziplock Bags
- ☐ Giveaway items
- ☐ Decorations (balloons, signs, confetti, centerpieces, tablecloths, etc.)

Please write which of the above (if applicable) you would estimate contributes the most single-use plastic waste at your events.

Single-Use Plastics Policy Knowledge Assessment

Please answer the following to the best of your ability

(Answer Choices: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, N/A)

1. I have been provided sufficient information on how to properly comply with the UCLA Single Use Plastics Policy.
2. I would like more information on the Single-Use Plastics Policy and how to ensure my events are compliant with the policy.
3. I consider the Single-Use Plastics Policy when planning events.
4. I feel confident that I can easily access and purchase plastic alternatives for my events.
5. I attempt to provide alternatives to single-use plastics or limit the purchase of single-use plastics for my events.

How did you learn about the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Policy? Type "N/A" if you have not learned about the policy.

Single-Use Plastics Policy Implementation

What factors do you consider most important when purchasing items for your events (utensils, foodware, giveaways, etc.)? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Cost
- ☐ Ease of access/convenience
- ☐ Familiarity with vendor
- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Design/appearance
- ☐ Durability/product quality
- ☐ Other:

What are the biggest barriers (if any) to utilizing sustainable alternatives to plastic products at your events? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Lack of quality/durable sustainable alternatives
- ☐ Sustainable alternatives are more costly than single-use plastic products
- ☐ Single-use plastic products are more convenient than sustainable alternatives
- ☐ I do not experience any barriers to using sustainable alternatives at my events
- ☐ Other (please elaborate):

Have you ever needed to check if an event complied with the UCLA Single-Use Plastic Policy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

On a scale of 1-5, how beneficial would each of the following be in helping you comply with the Single-Use Plastics Policy when planning your events?

(1 - not helpful, 5 - very helpful)

A 1-page implementation guide with a list of approved sustainable alternatives/vendors.

Scheduled meetings or presentations with UCLA Sustainability to discuss the Plastic Policy and ways to achieve compliance.

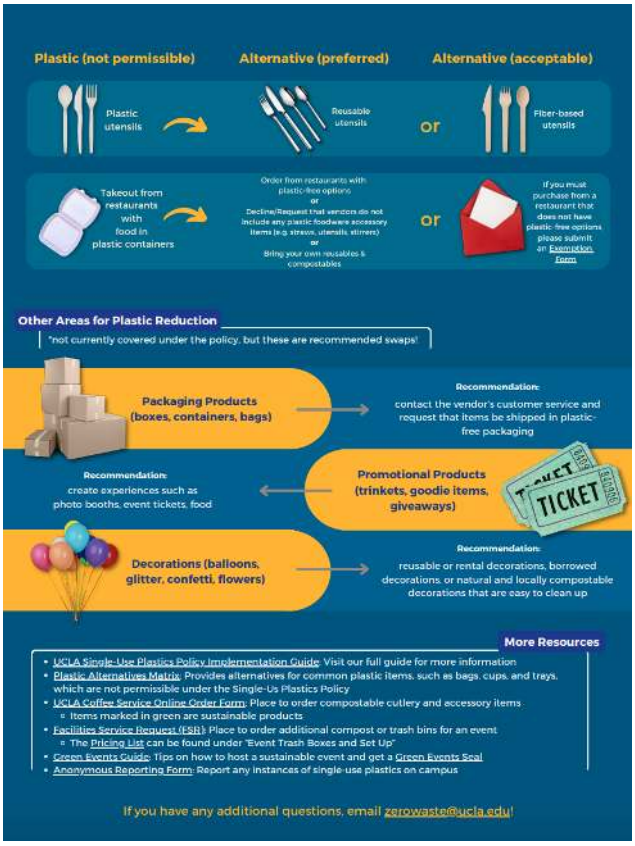
An online database of sustainable alternatives/vendors that I could directly purchase from.

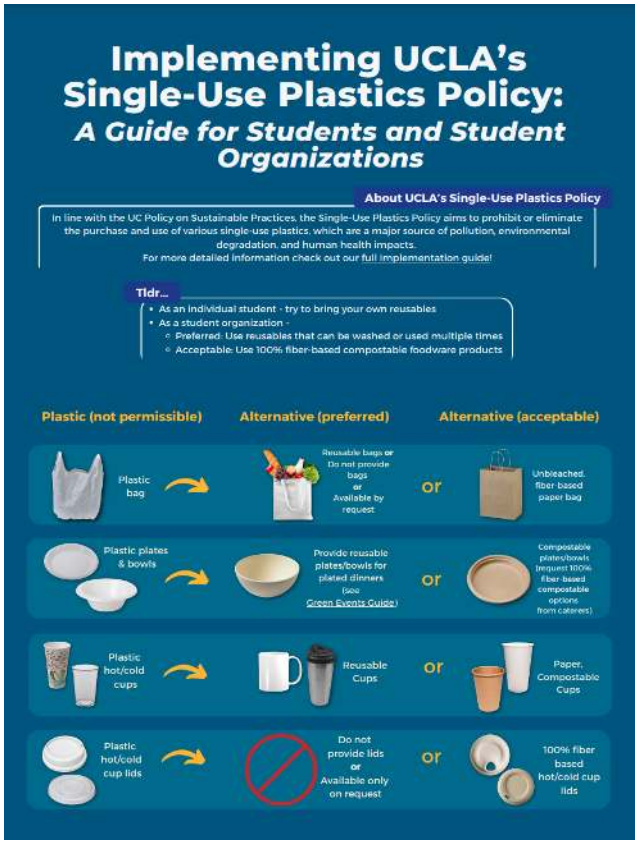
A fund which I could apply for and utilize to purchase sustainable plastic alternatives.

Besides the options listed above, are there any other methods that would better help you achieve compliance with the plastic policy? If so, please explain below. (optional)

If you have any other experiences with the Single-Use Plastics Policy or insights that you wish to share, please do so below. (optional)

Appendix G: Current Single-Use Plastics Policy One-Pager for Students and Student Organizations





From: https://www.sustain.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Single-Use-Plastics-Policy-One-Pager.pdf

Appendix H: Recommendations to Reduce Plastic Usage at Events One-Pager

Appendix I: Implementation Guide Template

UCLA Single-Use Plastics Implementation Guide for Event Planners

Purpose

Recognizing the detrimental environmental and health impacts of plastic, the purpose of the UCLA Single-Use Plastic Policy is to eliminate the sale, purchase, and distribution of single-use plastics with a transition towards sustainable alternatives. The following document is intended to assist event planners in organizing single-use plastic-free events.

Sustainable Alternatives for Individual Materials

Prohibited Plastics	Alternatives	Purchasing
Water & Beverage Bottles	Aluminum, glass, cardboard	*[Direct link to products]*
Plastic Bags	Cloth, paper	*[Direct link to products]*
Cups	Paper	*[Direct link to products]*
Cup Lids	Bioplastic	*[Direct link to products]*
Cup Sleeves	Cardboard, paper	*[Direct link to products]*
Plates	Pulp, paperboard, molded fiber, cardboard, bagasse (sugar cane fiber), wheatstraw	*[Direct link to products]*
Bowls	Pulp, paperboard, molded fiber, cardboard, bagasse, wheatstraw	*[Direct link to products]*
Hinged Containers	Bagasse	*[Direct link to products]*
Condiment Containers	Paper	*[Direct link to products]*
Food & Beverage Trays	Pulp, paperboard, molded fiber, cardboard, bagasse	*[Direct link to products]*
Utensils	Wood, bamboo, bioplastic, edible	*[Direct link to products]*
Straws	Paper, pasta, hay, food	*[Direct link to products]*
Stirrers	Wood, bamboo, sugar cane, edible	*[Direct link to products]*

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Approved Sustainable Vendors

[We are recommending that the Sustainability Office compile a list of vendors and catering services that are compliant with the Single-Use Plastic Policy and place that list here.]

[Vendor name with link], [location (if relevant)], [specific materials (if relevant)], [contact information]

Additional Resources

If you are **offered single-use plastics** or **see instances of plastic products** that violate the policy, please use the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Anonymous Reporting Form.

For **exemptions** to purchase from a vendor that does not provide plastic alternatives or purchase a plastic product that is prohibited under the policy, please utilize the UCLA Single-Use Plastics Exemption Form.

If you need **additional trash or compost bins** for your event, please use the Facilities Service Request Form (pricing can be found here under "Event Trash Boxes & Set Up").

If you would like to **read the Policy** in full, see UCLA Policy 809: Single-Use Plastics.

For **more detail**s on sustainable alternatives or exceptions, please see the Plastic Policy Presentation.

For additional information, guidance, or questions, please reach out to sustainability@ucla.edu.

UCLA Sustainability

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Our Interviewees: Jade Goegebuer, Bonny Bentzin, Isabelle Sui, Ella Crowell, Veronica Moy, Tammy Borerro

And all of our survey respondents!

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