Student Team Tackles Sustainability at UCLA Athletic Events

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Do you know what 40 lbs of paper cups looks like? 40 lbs of mozzarella cheese?

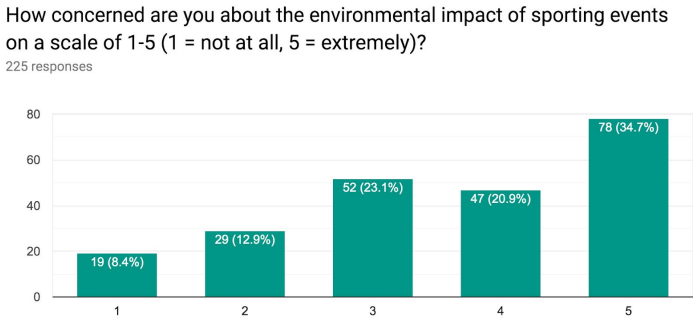
Author Dana Gunders frames the issue of food waste as such: “Imagine walking out of a grocery store with four bags of groceries, dropping one in the parking lot, and just not bothering to pick it up. That’s essentially what we’re doing.” UCLA Athletics staff and the Sustainability Action Research (SAR) Green Games student team conducted a complete waste audit during the UCLA’s Zero Waste men’s basketball game and found that 1,500 lbs of food waste was generated. Considering that this event only filled about half of the 13,000 seats in Pauley Pavilion, one can only imagine how much waste a sold out event would produce.

To make significant reductions to the environmental impact of sporting events at UCLA the SAR Green Games team has produced a multifaceted approach towards positive change. The team has researched ways to improve sporting events through multiple waste audits. The end goal of this research is to rethink UCLA Athletics’ policies, concession purchases, and attendee behaviors. The method of reaching these desired improvements manifests as unique, facility-specific green event guides applicable for all sporting events. These green event guides attempt to format a more cohesive approach for target sustainability goals set by the school such as the UCLA Zero Waste by 2020 campaign. Auditing athletic events provided the team with an opportunity to gather data and assess effective methods that can be implemented.

After analyzing results from the UCLA Basketball game waste audit, the SAR Green Games team resolved to develop green events templates for the athletic department that would offer a comprehensive plan to make their sporting events more sustainable. Templates are organized around the event facility in a “Before, During and After” an event structure rather than around a particular sport. This structure allows for greater reach across men and women’s teams as well as club and varsity. The templates includes details such as providing vendors with the proper waste bags to indicate recycling, compost and landfill, a map of all of a given facility’s receptacles and accessibility notes for creating more sustainable transportation to the events. The templates will serve as a practical step by step guide to make tangible and structural improvements to certain practices, while also helping to foster a more environmentally conscious culture. It is the goal of the SAR Green Games team to complete templates for Pauley Pavilion, Easton Stadium, Drake Stadium, Marina Aquatic Center, Annenberg Field and Spieker Aquatic Center.

In addition, to address the source of the majority of waste produced at athletic events, the team curated a policy recommendation directed towards ASUCLA concessions. Introducing souvenir cups, composting leftover food, and switching to compostable packaging for food products are

included in the recommendations. The SAR Green Games team also distributed a student survey[1] to gauge pre-existing knowledge of these prevailing issues and interest in improved sustainability within UCLA Athletics. At large the takeaway was simple, the UCLA student population is concerned about the environmental impact of sporting events.



In actions, the SAR Green Games team is constantly looking to build on their work and respond to the concerns held by many. On the evening of Friday May 10, 2019, following a softball game at Easton Stadium, the SAR Green Games team put their gloves back on and began sifting through trash bags. Due to the smaller size of the softball stadium, the team conducted a more controlled waste audit that involved different types of signage for waste disposal streams. The first category included signage that had both written labels and graphics denoting compost, recycling, and landfill. The second category consisted of signage with only written labels to denote these waste streams. As a control, trash receptacles not separated into three streams and with no signage or graphics were used. The purpose of this setup was to determine which set of signage (none, labels, or labels with pictures) was the most effective at helping people properly sort their waste. Sampled data projected a 72.3% diversion rate if all the waste had been properly sorted, depicting the need for proper signage. This audit emphasized how it is important to make both structural upstream improvements in the athletic department while also educating fans on proper waste disposal.

With masses of people filling large venues, athletic events provide both unique challenges and opportunities to sustainability efforts. The SAR Green Games team hopes to take advantage of the opportunity presented to make positive change.

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1 https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScyYKygr3u2yVcqE2HhngXM0_GlC3Sy-ZzS-OELXIx73iIODA/viewform