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### **Let's Talk Trash: UCLA Students Want to Make Zero Waste Events Happen**

By SAR Zero Waste Events Team; Alicia Kwan, Anna Thomas, David Zeng, Owen Emerson, Valeree Catangay, Zachary Alter with Stakeholders Erin Fabris and Bonny Bentzin

Zero waste is an emerging topic within sustainability, often viewed as daunting and unachievable. But when the world says no, UCLA says no problem. In 2007, UCLA adopted a goal of zero waste by 2020, meaning that 90 percent of solid waste generated on UCLA's campus would be diverted from the landfill. To help achieve this goal, the Zero Waste Events team plans to encourage zero waste to landfill strategies within the events process at UCLA, with the goal of eventually applying to success the entirety of the campus.

The University of California goal to reach "[Zero Waste by 2020](#)" is echoed throughout the campus. It's plastered on posters, dining halls, and trash bins. When students are asked what sustainability actions are being taken on their campus, the most likely response would be "Zero Waste by 2020." The end goal is widely known, but what progress has been made? Why hasn't more been done? Large obstacles include lack of knowledge, apathy, and financial barriers.

Although there have been visible revisions in campus environment to reach that goal, one major untouched area that could provide a large impact is events at UCLA.

With municipal solid waste in landfill accounting for 15.4% of methane emissions (United States Environmental Protection Agency), transitioning to zero waste can make a significant difference in reducing methane emissions. Methane has a shorter atmospheric lifespan and is a much more potent greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>; therefore methane reduction would provide immense relief on the effects of climate change. Not only does landfill waste contribute to global climate change, but it also has [ramifications](#) for human health, biodiversity loss, groundwater contamination, air pollution, and other impacts.

QUOTE: *“There is no such thing as ‘away’. When we throw anything away, it must go somewhere.” - Annie Leonard*

UCLA sends approximately 1.5 million pounds of waste to the landfill each year. In order to move the campus forward, zero waste events are a crucial opportunity for waste reduction. With such a large campus and so many events happening all the time - from sports games to club meetings to conferences - event waste is a huge component of UCLA’s waste stream. Additionally, the public nature of events has important potential educational impacts. Through planning and implementing zero waste events, event managers, employees, and attendees will learn about sustainable practices to minimize waste and how to properly sort their waste. Ideally, these individuals will spread this information throughout their networks, reducing waste on UCLA’s campus and beyond.



A lot of people can mean a lot of waste. Implementing zero waste strategies can help prevent waste outputs at large events like UCLA Bruin Day. Source: UCLA Circle K

Over the past two quarters, the Sustainability Action Research (SAR) Zero Waste Events team has focused on implementing scalable zero waste strategies at events throughout campus. Under the guidance of Erin Fabris, Sustainability Manager for Housing & Hospitality Services, and Bonny Bentzin, Deputy Chief Sustainability Officer, the team has aimed to make zero waste events feasible and accessible to UCLA.

The team started off by auditing various events on campus, including a basketball game at Pauley Pavilion and a week-long sustainability conference at the Anderson School of Management. They spoke with custodians and event organizers and recorded waste patterns of event attendees and sources of waste such as concessions, catering, and giveaways. These audits helped the team understand participants' behaviors and develop best practices for zero waste events.

While observing these events, they wanted to further understand the event planning process through different perspectives, so they contacted and interviewed event managers, catering teams, clients, and health inspectors. Through these collaboration efforts, the team gradually identified common themes in the challenges of having zero waste events. These interactions provided them insight to improve UCLA's existing Green Events Certification, a system that allows clients to make their events more sustainable by following specific criteria via a Green Events Guide. The team reorganized its contents and added resources to the guide to make it a more user-friendly platform, such as a map of the campus's compost dumpsters and waste signage templates. The team also created a [survey](#) targeting event managers, planners, and clients at UCLA to reach a wider scope of opinions on zero waste events.

As noted in UCLA's zero waste plan, "UCLA is like a small city, with an average daily population of 70,000 consisting of students, staff, faculty, patients, and visitors," which consequently makes any solution more difficult to implement. Albeit a daunting task, any step toward promoting zero waste event strategies will prove impactful in achieving the 2020 goal and encourage similar practices across other college campuses. The Zero Waste Events team's research has ultimately served as a critical foundation to achieve zero waste events on campus and UCLA's overall sustainability goals.