

Zero Waste Events

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Introduction

In 2007, UCLA made it a goal to send zero waste to landfills by 2020. That goal, though ambitious, is feasible. The possibility to achieve this goal is brought about, as we have found, through cohesive organization amongst planning entities on and off campus. A large portion of emitted waste from UCLA's campus is sourced from all of the events hosted and held in campus facilities from basketball games and conferences to everyday catered meetings. What we have attempted to create is a plan, an outlined and specific way in which zero waste events can be standardized across campus. The obstacle to overcome was in the realm of clarity and information in relation to just how events are planned and managed on campus. This project is an effort in clarifying the above issue for event managers, planners, employees and the general attendees. What is being implemented is knowledge in a broad sense, the idea of sustainable event planning and practice with proper waste disposal methods. In the long-term it is an effort for UCLA to serve as a model of zero waste event planning for the greater LA area, to continue normalizing sustainability. Summarily, the goal was to create a way for UCLA to implement zero waste events as the norm.

In attempting to achieve all of the aforementioned goals we came across some great milestones and markedly important points of realization. Initially our mission was one targeted towards creating zero waste events within UCLA Recreation then transitioned to catering services with a switch in stakeholders. After many interviews with a variety of event managers and facility managers in an effort to see what could be made zero waste in the time period of two quarters we reached a point of realization. It became clear that there was a disconnect amongst planning entities across campus; the most significant of which was the ease of access to green event planning information. The Green Events Certification Guide published by UCLA was hard to use and difficult to find. Tangentially, many faculty, staff, and other stakeholders in our interviewing process were unsure about simple aspects of creating a zero waste event such as compost bin locations. This prevalent issue became the driving force behind our project. We shifted the focus of our project from specific areas of campus to a broader focus in the realm of accessibility of information. Our deliverables became not just executing zero waste events at Impact Week, a conference centered around socially and environmentally responsible business at the Anderson School of Management, but a revamped Green Events Certification Guide and survey of the event planning community on what adversity is faced in creating zero waste events. These deliverables were the efforts of our team in making a giant leap forward to eventually

streamline the implementation and transition towards exclusively zero waste events across UCLA.

Background

The Zero Waste Events team is one of a kind. With a broad focus that encompasses all of UCLA the initial thought process was nothing short of daunting to achieve all that is implied in zero waste events. Prior to our team the only other SAR team that shares a semblance of zero waste events was “Zero Waste Pauley” from 2014 (Young). The focus of that team was concentrated, clear and in many ways more defined. We struggled with defining the initial scope of our project as discussed earlier with our many shifts in focus. With time and research on the topic based other universities as well as our own survey the scope became more explicit. As found on ASU’s campus zero waste events are difficult yet manageable with a drastic shift in supply chain. The provisions of exclusively compostable items drastically improves odds of achieving a zero waste event campus (Brown). This was incorporated into our project with much of the Green Events Certification Guide steering planners and managers towards compostable materials. Building on the idea of material provisions it was found that the plan for Clark University highlights a 5 step plan for zero waste events starting with elimination of single use items (Sustainable). It was evident in our

research of a variety of campuses that the integral part of zero waste event planning was making it both extremely clear that compostables and recyclables are necessary as well as providing the needed infrastructure for access to information in creating events. Essentially, knowledge is one part but the ability to execute and build upon that knowledge is an issue of access. Knowing where and how to create a zero waste event thus became the goal of this team.

Our Story

Being a new SAR team we had the unique opportunity of a lot a leeway in determining the direction of our project. This unique opportunity allowed us the freedom to investigate a lot of different areas within the events process at UCLA. Additionally, with the decentralized nature of events on a big campus like UCLA, we were left with many avenues available to explore. Hence our team took a while to examine how events and sustainability come together through different perspectives.

Initially with guidance of our stakeholder at the time Katie Zeller, former Sustainability Coordinator for UCLA Recreation, we looked into Recreation events and how they could more easily convert to zero waste. However, we had a hard time accessing a lot of UCLA Recreation events and found a majority of the events to be

non-catered team practices with little food or opportunities for waste reduction.

Upon losing our stakeholder, we pivoted away from a specific focus on Recreation events.

Next we shifted our focus to catering and food waste, which we determined from our informants to be large components of event waste. We started by meeting with all the major catering entities on campus - ASUCLA Catering, UCLA Catering, and the Medical Center Catering - and were pleasantly surprised with the progress the companies were making in terms of sustainable practices and purchasing. All of the catering companies have recyclable and sustainable service ware options; ASUCLA and UCLA have made those policies their standard included in their base price, with other options available upon request. UCLA Catering also had a well-functioning composting system that largely reduced organic waste sent to the landfill from their kitchen and services. The companies also shared their challenges in going completely zero waste. All cited the ease, price, and shelf-life of single-use disposable items like condiments and creamers. In terms of food donations, the companies cited their interest in donating excess food waste but difficulty in doing so due to health code policy specificities and the labor costs involved with facilitating the donations. Moreover, there was lack of knowledge of what the actual Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) regulations are concerning food donations. We also discussed with individuals from UCLA EH&S and

the Community Programs Office (CPO) Food Closet interested in connecting excess food waste to tackling food insecurity on campus. While passionate individuals and student groups continue to highlight the problem, barriers remain on our large and decentralized campus. Therefore, in our time span, we thought it best to steer away from addressing food waste and food donations because many of the barriers we encountered were either items that we did not have control over such as hiring a student to manage food donations from catered events.

From the catering and food waste focus, we shifted our focus to gaining the perspective of those planning events. We worked with UCLA Anderson Graduate Student David Poli, who was implementing the recommendations from the Green Events Certification Guide for Anderson's Impact Week. From David we gained the insight of incomplete and problematic parts of the guide, even through the eyes of someone environmentally conscious. At the receptions for Impact Week we helped attendees sort their waste to ensure that recyclable and compostable products did not end up in the landfill. We also participated in an outreach event for Earth Month to engage with the student body about daily waste. At our booth we educated students on sustainable alternatives to everyday single-use disposable items through an interactive activity and gave out bamboo toothbrushes to participants. In total we were able to connect with over 155 students about simple changes they can make to reduce waste!

Making zero waste events possible is heavily dependent on those who implement them--namely the people who plan and host events. Because event planners and managers are so vital to the success of zero waste events, we felt that it was imperative to understand their perspective on zero waste events and potential challenges. To better understand their view, we created a survey that asked a range of questions that assessed the event planners' willingness to adopt zero waste events, their awareness of zero waste products (such as compostables, recyclables, and reusable products), challenges in planning/executing a zero waste event, and resources they would like to receive in helping them plan and execute a Zero Waste Event.

Working closely with Bonny Bentzin, UCLA's Deputy Chief Sustainability Officer, we researched the UCLA staff directory to generate a contact list of all relevant stakeholders on campus who engage in event planning and management. To maximize survey responses, we utilized incentives by providing Starbucks gift cards to respondents. In total, we received 21 survey responses from stakeholders. From these responses, we were able to perform an analysis on the event planners' common concerns, challenges, awareness, and perspective on zero waste events.

Due to the short time frame of our project, the scope of our project focused more on data collection and research rather than the actual implementation. In addition, we realized that the best recommended implementations required research and evidence

to support it. In order to provide the best solutions, we also cannot be thinking of the problem from our standpoint, but understand the perspectives of the event planners. We hope that our research can provide a solid foundation for future SAR teams to start implementing changes that would address the needs of the event planners and managers.

Moving forward with the survey information we decided to revamp the Green Event Guide as the main deliverable for our project. From talking to event planners on campus and analyzing the survey we found the current guide to be underutilized and have significant room for improvement. The Green Events Certification Guide represents the main point of centralized collaboration between event planning and sustainability efforts on campus. Hence having an effective, helpful, and user-friendly guide is of utmost importance. With this in mind we set out to improve and update the guide. Our team began by identifying areas of the guide that were unclear or repetitive and areas that needed further explanation or resources. From this we reordered the categories and section in the guide to make it more succinct. We ended up changing the format to a table for each individual category - Communication, Waste Management, Food and Beverage, Decorations, Transportation, and Energy Saving - including an action item, intent and description, and resources. We found this format to be easier to digest and more user-friendly, while providing room for all the new

resources, information sheets, and visuals. Throughout the process we received direction from our stakeholder Bonny Bentzin and input from those who regularly use the guide, such as graduate student Evelyn Alvarez.

Results and Discussion

When we had originally created this survey, we not only wanted to examine event planners' willingness to plan a zero waste event, but another main goal of ours was to get a better understanding of the process and the obstacles they face. When asked what their top three challengers were as event organizers, the top reoccurring themes in answers were 1) staying within a client's budget, 2) finding accommodating venue space and availability, and 3) locating caterers that specialize or offer sustainable services. After including a few other general questions to learn more about event planning in itself, we proceeded to ask questions with sustainability in mind. For example, we asked if they had heard about the Green Events Certification Guide, to which only person said they had heard of it and have used it before. The others either had never heard of it or had heard of it but never used it. When we had asked about zero waste events, the most commonly listed challenges included 1) logistical planning issues and complying with zero waste event protocols and guidelines, 2) not being

informed enough or provided with educational material to know in depth what a zero waste event entails and 3) finding supplies that are cost efficient but also look nice for clients. As part of the survey, we also wanted to ask their opinions on implementation of compostable and reusable wear. Many had said compostable wear usually is not as durable and does not look nearly as nice.

The top 3 challenges event organizers find with hosting an event are:

- 1) Staying within a client's budget,
- 2) Finding accommodating venue space and availability
- 3) Locating caterers that specialize or offer sustainable services.

Most common explanations from those surveyed that said they wouldn't put on a zero waste event:

- 1) Logistical planning issues and complying with zero waste event protocols and guidelines.
- 1) Not being informed enough or provided with educational material to know in depth what a zero waste event entails.
- 2) Finding supplies that are cost efficient and look nice for clients.

When asked what challenges they faced in implementing compostables and reusable ware into their events, organizers surveyed said:

- Platters, bowls, cutlery, and other materials lack in durability and aren't visually appealing or classy.
- Ordering such items would be too expensive and go beyond budget.
- Planners would love to be environmentally friendly but options for doing so are difficult to find when ordering food.
- Logistics with proper disposal of compostable and reusable products poses a large problem as items are often not thrown away into proper end of cycle receptacles.

When asked if event personnel knew what the Green Events Certification Guide was, **60% of those surveyed said they either hadn't heard of the events guide or they had but never used it.** About **70% of those surveyed hadn't heard of the Green Events Certification or hadn't used it for an event.** **60% however are interested in 'green' event consultation** and 27% need only more information on the process.

When asked what types of resources would be most beneficial to putting on a Zero Waste event, these were the commonalities with those surveyed:

- An approved vendor list in compliance with the guidelines of the Green Events Certification Guide that includes what they provide and cost estimates
- A consultation with event staff members on how to manage and plan 'green' events

- A centralized network between vendors, event staff, and facilities management to maintain a common level of zero waste policy education.
- A detailed Green Events Certification Guide

Our survey yielded an expected response rate of about 20%, and gave us enriching information about the trials and tribulations that event organizers and catering personnel go through in producing a dining and event experience for a client. We've compacted and organized all the survey responses into a digestible analysis for our stakeholders, one we think will give a much clearer image for next year's Zero Waste Events team to look at, and help them focus on the next steps on the persistent road to increased sustainability on UCLA's campus and meeting the UC wide system goal of zero waste by 2020.

As the first Zero Waste Events team for SAR, we realized early on that we were faced with the unique task of creating the groundwork and anchor for future teams linked to this project. We pivoted a few times on our project scope, as more research, auditing, and interviews had to be conducted to fully understand how knowledgeable campus organizers are on zero waste events and sustainable catering services. Our survey yielded a concise and clear message of a central problem within UCLA, in connection to all entities associated with UCLA that produced catered events. The issue we found through the answers from our survey was there was a clear decentralization

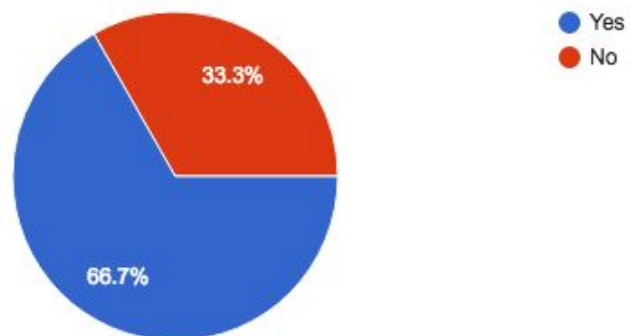
between all catering organizations at UCLA. Every group is independent from one another, and thus isolated in the process and planning of catered events. UCLA has an Office of Sustainability and a Zero Waste Task Force, but there lacks a centralized communication network between event organizations and these offices. We believe that in addition to our newly reorganized Green Events Certification Guide, a campus-wide sustainable events task force could be used to educate and consult UCLA organizations on how to plan and produce a zero waste event.

It appears there is high potential for events at UCLA to move towards sustainability. Over two-thirds of the event stakeholders we surveyed responded that they have considered planning a zero waste event. Thus, there is certainly a willingness for event planners to host a more sustainable event with zero waste.

Despite having such a high willingness to partake in planning a zero waste event, there are rarely any zero waste events that take place at UCLA currently. To understand why, we must understand the obstacles

Have you considered planning a zero waste event?

21 responses



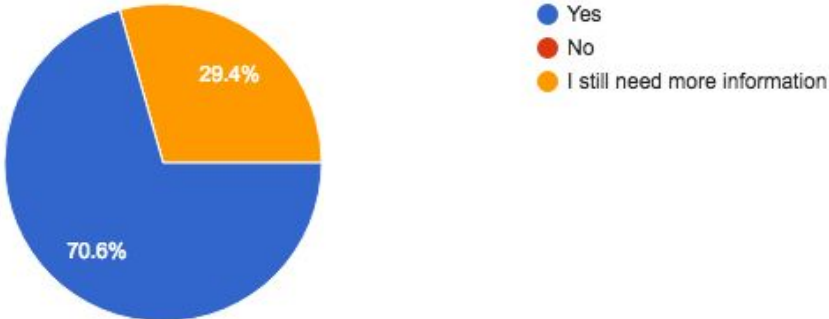
and barriers event planners face when attempting to put on a zero waste event. The top challenge that event planners mentioned was the difficulty in making attendees of events comply with zero waste protocols. Over 40% of event stakeholders responded that it was difficult to communicate zero waste protocols to event attendees and equally difficult to ensure they dispose of materials correctly. From the survey, we found that guest experience is one of the top priorities for event planners. Therefore, it is essential that there be a strategy developed in which event planners and managers can effectively educate and communicate zero waste protocols to guests while maintaining a positive guest experience. The survey analysis may be reviewed in the Appendix of this report.

The second most common challenge for event planners was the lack of proper waste disposal bins. They mentioned that sometimes recycling and composting bins would not be available at events. The third main obstacle for event planners was that there is a lack of zero waste protocol. Event planners simply do not know the best practices for executing zero waste events. One survey respondent mentioned that it was too time intensive for them to perform their own research on zero waste practices in addition to finding caterers who follow zero waste guidelines. It is also a challenge for them to source zero waste products. An event planner thought it would be helpful to provide an “approved vendor list” for zero waste products.

Another challenge we noticed from the responses is that there is not a system in place to assist with post event cleaning. Using reusable products is very difficult for event planners because it is not easy to clean and as a result, disposable material is preferred at events. Even if event planners chose to pursue reusable products, there is the barrier of labor costs of cleaning. Cost for zero waste products and cleaning labor is another consideration. Cost is a critical factor for the event planning process. One of our survey questions asked what the top challenges when planning an event are. By far, the top concern and challenge for event planners is staying within budget. As a result, any future implementation of zero waste products or cleaning system for reusable products must take this into account. These products and

If the challenges you listed above were resolved, would you consider planning a zero waste event?

17 responses



cleaning services must be cost efficient and allow for event planners to be within budget.

Despite these obstacles, the outlook for future zero waste events is bright. If these concerns are addressed effectively, 70% of the event planners surveyed would consider planning a zero waste event and there were not any respondents that opposed planning a zero waste event if concerns were addressed.

In addition to the survey conducted, the information gathered from our interviews with catering services, health inspectors, events managers, planners, and clients provided us with substantial insight to improve UCLA's existing Green Events Certification Guide. This guide allows clients to make their events more sustainable by following specific criteria and completing a quiz to certify their event with a Green Events Seal. It is currently available on the UCLA Events website at green.uclaevents.com, but the Events Office is planning to renovate their site, therefore there may be a need to find a new host website for the Green Events Certification Guide in the future.

Although the original guide contained valuable information on sustainable events, many clients found it difficult to navigate because of its many unorganized bullet points. These bullet points regarding many different topics were previously organized into three categories: “Before the Event,” “During the Event,” and “After the Event.” There was then a “certification” section, detailing the points listed in several categories such as waste management, communication, and decor. These bullet points were a reiteration of the bullet points listed in the before, during, and after categories, so we planned to consolidate the certification section with other section into one cohesive set of guidelines to make the content less redundant. Our team reorganized the entire guide’s contents into the categories originally listed at the end of the guide, in addition to categories we created due to similarity in points. These categories include (from highest priority to lowest priority: communication (communicating with guests), waste management, food and beverage, decor, transportation, and energy saving.

To address the issues clients experienced, we decided to create a more user-friendly platform by organizing the tips listed into a table format with three columns. The first column contains an action item (for example: go paperless; use an eco-friendly solar generator; use sustainable ware to serve food). The second column contains a list of suggestions to help execute that action item. Most suggestion lists begin with an “intent” that states the reasoning behind why that action item is good for

the environment and a sustainable practice. This helps clients to further understand the intentions of the listed guidelines. Lastly, the third column provides resources that clients can use to implement the suggestions listed. We wanted to make sure these resources addressed concerns raised in our interviews over the quarter. Some of these resources include a map that locates all of the compost dumpsters at UCLA, waste signage templates to create signage catered to the event's specific waste products, and a list of recommendations for sustainable rentals, zero waste catering services, and more.

Challenges and Difficulties

The biggest challenge our team has faced throughout our project was the difficulty in determining our focus. As the first team with the topic of Zero Waste Events, we did not have a lot to go off of and had a lot we wanted to dive into. Reflecting on the project, we were able to meet with so many different types of UCLA faculty and employees it really gave us a much clearer picture on the whole events process. But our whole process meant that once we finally determined our project deliverables we had to move fast to finish everything by the end of the quarter. Our team also frequently struggled with getting connected with the right contacts, so we have left a contact list we compiled over the past two quarters for a future SAR team.

Another consistent theme in the difficulties of our project is the lack of centralization in the event planning process at UCLA. Just this fact alone makes it difficult for any sort of collaboration effort between events and sustainability. With no standardization for implementation across campus, it is difficult to identify the right space to go about implementing zero waste practices and on top of that, to see noticeable progress. This is why we decided to update the Green Events Certification Guide, because we saw it as the only central space for event planning and sustainability efforts to merge and wanted to make it the best resource possible. However, with that being said, there are a lot of issues with the Green Events Certification Guide that we hope to change. As of now, the guide is not well managed or monitored and does not seem to serve its intended purpose very well. For example, there's no one to direct questions to if reviewing the guide, there is no record of the traction the guide gets, and on top of that, there's no way of keeping the event organizers accountable on the items they note they will implement. Unfortunately, not many people seem to know about the guide either. The guide was created with good intentions and has a lot of potential, but there is a lot of room for improvement to meet its original goals and intentions. Although our time for the project has ended, we will continue to keep in close contact with the events office to determine the future of the guide, how it will be managed, and the role the events office will play.

Conclusion

By addressing and reorganizing the Green Events Certification Guide, we made the information more digestible. Although the information originally contained in the guide was beneficial, it was hard to sort through and not very user friendly. From the people we had talked to, many also did not have any background knowledge in sustainability so the amount of information was overwhelming. With zero waste anything, and especially events, being a daunting task, progress can and must be made by everyone doing their part. However, for people to play their role, they need to understand what they're working with and what viable steps can be taken. This is where we intend the Green Events Certification Guide to come in. We are not expecting for people to take every suggestion from the guide, but to take those that are applicable and helpful and apply it to their own event. Ultimately, our goal is to help them realize that zero waste events is not as incredulous of a thought. Our goal is for others to be able to realize that they as an individual or part of a group, organization, or department can make a difference by taking small steps. We hope the guide will gain more attention and from there, serve its purpose as a central document for sustainability- minded event planning.

However, there is still so much that needs to be done with the guide, which is where we hope the future SAR team comes in. We hope there will be a SAR Zero Waste Events

Team next year to continue and build on the progress we have made. To make the transition from teams to be more efficient, we hope to be able to meet with them as well so no unnecessary work is completed. We encourage the future team to use this guide to help audit events. We envision this step would resemble a similar program at UC Santa Barbara where a group of students consults with event planners about hosting green events and gives them suggestions as well as audits their events. The students then conclude by having a post-event debrief session with the event planners which includes suggestions or points they could consider next time. We believe this is a crucial next step for the broad realm of zero waste events because we need to see how effective and beneficial the guide is in helping plan zero waste events. Additionally, auditing events will address the issue of accountability and will allow event organizers to address their issues and questions. From there, we could reorganize the guide according to how well it performed with the events. Our team has taken the first step in creating the foundation, but for us to reach our goal, there is room for a lot of work to be done by the future team. Additionally, we hope to encourage TGIF and the SOL advisors to use and share the information within this guide. We have mentioned the idea of making an agreement with TGIF in which they will not grant funds to student groups planning events if they do not review and implement suggestions from this guide. Overall, our vision for the next SAR Zero Waste Events team is to make event planning a

more accountable and collaborate process and to assess the effectiveness of the guide.

References

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Appendix

- [Green Events Certification Guide](#)
- [Green Events Survey Analysis](#)