

Friday, December 6, 2019  
ENV461: Living Labs of Sustainability

## **Pathways to Sustainability: Event Planning Practices at the University of Toronto**

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**Acknowledgements:**

We would like to thank the representatives from the President's office at U of T, the Office of Advancement at U of T, UTSU, StudentLife, Catering and Event Services, and Academic and Campus Events for their participation in our workshop and interviews. We would also like to thank the student union representatives that replied to our online survey and representatives from McGill, And of course, we would like to thank the Sustainability Office at U of T for this opportunity.

### **Disclaimer:**

This report indicates the interpretations of ENV461's Group 5 and is not representative of the Sustainability Office, the University of Toronto, or any other participants involved in the study.

### **Introduction:**

While the term "sustainable event" is frequently used among a wide range of scholars, there is no universal understanding of what a "sustainable event" is and is not. According to the Green Meeting Guide (2009) [1], "a sustainable (green) meeting is one designed, organized and implemented in a way that minimizes negative environmental impacts and leaves a positive legacy for the host community."

Focusing on the academic events, Neugebauer *et al.* (2019) [2] apply a comprehensive Life Cycle Assessment for all phases of a scientific conference held on sustainability topics. It includes three main phases: 1) preparation of the conference, 2) conference execution, and 3) further pre-/post-conference activities (participants' travel related to the conference) (Figure 1 in Appendix). In some cases, conference organizers are making efforts to increase awareness of sustainability issues among participants and apply different incentive mechanisms to encourage attendees to actively play a positive role in increasing conference sustainability at three mentioned phases [3].

Analyzing the related literature shows that there are several studies addressing minimizing the environmental impact of events in terms mainly of travel activities of participants [4,5]. Although there are a few reports providing guidelines to achieve a sustainable event [6,7], an analysis covering different aspects of a sustainable event and how it can be achieved has yet to be conducted. In reflection of this, the

Sustainability Office (SO) at the University of Toronto (U of T) St. George Campus, decided to undertake the development of a robust Sustainable Event program, in order to assess current practices and conditions, learn of opportunities to advance sustainability considerations within U of T campus culture, identify common goals among stakeholders and service providers, make supports and tools available so as to empower actors to produce events more sustainably as the norm.

In the fall of 2019, the SO defined a living lab project opportunity to develop a survey strategy with event related stakeholders and student group 5. The idea was to better understand the perspective of event professionals on the services, conditions and expectations at U of T that do or do not enable them to consider sustainability as a priority in their event decisions and plans, including communication materials, processes and other support, incentives and evaluation tools or methods. The survey strategy and collection of insights and perceptions was intended to inform pathways to the future design and development of Sustainable Event program elements. These pathways include identifying priorities to focus on in the near and short term, determine interest and/or receptivity to the establishment of procedures, so as to apply limited resources as effectively as possible.

This project aimed at supporting event planners in making their practices more environmentally sustainable. The SO is concerned with the logistics and feedback in regards to implementing potential sustainable event strategies in U of T's decentralized environment. Relying on a participatory backcasting approach, this study as a part of the SO project aims to investigate perceptions and insights of key U of T event organizers regarding the challenges and opportunities to implementing events more sustainably, how event stakeholders want event practices to be evaluated, and how they want their sustainability efforts to be communicated.

The goal of this study is to gain insight about the present sustainability of events at U of T, and to inform the Sustainability Office's broader consultation strategy on sustainable events at U of T going forward. These insights will address the perceived challenges and opportunities to make events at U of T more sustainable. The opportunities for change being explored include practical recommendations for a new

method of evaluation of the level of sustainability of events, tools and services, removal of barriers, and incentives. These insights will assist the SO to determine areas of further investigation and consultation with stakeholders to develop and establish a framework that make environmental sustainability a priority with event planners and decisions makers at U of T.

### **Methods of Collection:**

#### ***Document Analysis***

Initially, we employed extensive document analysis of other universities' sustainability programs in order to benchmark contemporary practices in this area. We scanned over a dozen university websites, and analyzed any and all resources published by their sustainability departments. From this preliminary research, we then selected three specific case studies that offered a high-degree of similarity to U of T in terms of size, resources and culture. Through this process, we identified Harvard University (Massachusetts, USA), McGill University (Quebec, Canada) and New York University (New York, USA) as being representative of key characteristics of U of T based on the size of their academic population, the decentralisation of their campuses as well as their relative proximity to Toronto. These key characteristics helped to draw parallels between active policy instruments being used in this area, as well as to note equivalencies in the cultural contexts evident alongside the social norms surrounding sustainability on the east coast of North America specifically. Furthermore, these universities were chosen due to the transparency of information published, as this allowed for a more in-depth analysis of their programs.

Our initial scan provided us with a list of themes regarding sustainability that educated the avenues with which we chose to follow our research when performing our later surveys and interviews. These themes included topics in event management such as waste mitigation techniques, comprehensive educational resources and communication tools, auditing processes, and innovative programs such as standards of recognition for sustainable efforts. Institutions like McGill provided us with evidence of tangible initiatives such as their waste educator program: wherein the university "hires 25 McGill students, as 'waste educators' to inform incoming students of proper waste

sorting practices, and to answer any questions pertaining to composting,” during various events in the first three weeks of each semester [11]. This particular theme of peer-to-peer sustainability education was also reflected in NYU’s “EcoReps” program which have students engage in “programming, and projects, [to] inspire their residential hall community to be more environmentally-conscious and live more sustainably” [12]. Thematic parallels regarding different educative guides and resources were also documented, as each university promoted the shift towards hosting zero-waste events with their own published event-guidelines and marketing campaigns. Ranging from comprehensive documents to very simple pictorial representations, each of the institutions in our case study had an event guide of some description to support planners in making more sustainable choices at each of their events. Such publications allowed for a more in-depth analysis and prompted us to revise the current initiatives in place at U of T.

There were challenges that we faced when performing this method of data collection. These were mostly centred upon the nature of analysing secondary information, only having access to public resources and news articles and having a distinct lack of context for most information gathered. Throughout the information gathering and analysis stages we attempted to contact each university’s sustainability department with a list of questions designed to offer a deeper level of understanding the timeline that each program followed between design and implementation, in order to understand what processes were most effective and which avenues to avoid at U of T. However, we only received one impactful and timely response, leaving this analysis comprehensive, yet entrenched in the bias of each institution’s desire to promote the successes of their programs.

### ***ACE Interview***

In order to further develop the questions for the online survey and workshop with event planning stakeholders, we conducted an interview with an ACE (Academic and Campus Events) team member. This would allow us to speak to someone who interacts with many different stakeholders in all stages of the event planning process. ACE collaborates with both external and internal stakeholders to allow for events to run

smoothly. In order to get the most out of the interview with the ACE team member, specific questions were incorporated that pertain to ACE's perspective on event planning. This interview provided us with the opportunity to run through questions that we may ask in the workshop, gain insider knowledge on the relationships between event planning stakeholders, and identify common challenges event planners and service providers face and would likely be willing to discuss openly. It is important to consider the dynamics between these stakeholders, as these considerations will help to guide our questions in terms of which topics to emphasize or avoid.

The question for the ACE interview were structured into six categories, similar to the categories outlined in the Sustainable Events Guide previously published by the SO: processes, venues, food, and waste. Three additional categories of questions were also added: challenges, opportunities, and sustainability. Challenges addressed the most common challenges that the ACE team member encounters with other event planners, while opportunities addressed examples of ways that the Sustainability office could support event planners through different services and tools to improve sustainability of events at U of T. There was also a section dedicated to Orientation, due to the large, decentralized characteristics of the event (which is in reality a series of hundreds of events varying in size), which makes it interesting to study in terms of sustainability. And finally, the structure of this interview deliberately included more informal, open-ended questions to allow for as much elaboration as possible, and to inform the development of the online survey and workshop questions.

From our interview with an ACE representative, we were able to learn the various nuances of different event planning stakeholders, allowing us to make the most of our limited time in our small, structured workshop. For example, the ACE representative advised us to be careful of our language pertaining to policy surrounding sustainable events at U of T, as certain actors may respond negatively to it, while others would be open to it. These polarized views reflect the decentralized and hierarchical nature at U of T overall, as well as within the event planning process. We also gained insight from them that for most event planners, the widespread primary concern in regard to sustainability in event planning is waste. It was communicated that waste is a focus because it seems like the most feasible thing to control in terms of sustainable efforts.

And finally, a general theme that came across in the interview with the ACE representative was that most event planners have other priorities and sustainability will, in the minds of the stakeholders we later interviewed, come after size of event, venue, and the overall guest experience.

### ***Online Survey***

The online survey that we formulated shortly after our ACE interview garnered 22 responses student event organizers, mainly derived from student unions. The survey included 15 questions that enabled us to gain a more detailed understanding of clubs and their experience planning events in relation to sustainability. We separated the questions into 3 sections. The first section had a set of introductory questions which were general and set the framework for the later questions. These included people's role in their organization, the size and types of events hosted, as well as the types of people they would host events for. The second section went into detail about general sustainability in event planning, with questions on what sustainability initiatives they do, the identification of barriers to sustainability, and a question on the use of a land acknowledgement. We decided to focus our questions on the categories that were emphasized in the Sustainable Events Guide designed by the SO. The following sections focus on venue options, waste management, opportunities for improvement and support in furthering sustainable event planning.

The overall data gathered from each sectioned revealed both quantitative and qualitative results, as the questions ranged from multiple choice, yes/no, and both short-long-form responses. As a summary of the results, the general student leaders planned events for students (100%), with the average size of the events being 1-35 people (81.8%), and for the two other categories, 36-50 or 50-100 people it both received 9.1% votes. To analyze the data most effectively for making suggestions for the SO, this section will be focusing on what have been identified as "important" questions (i.e., directly related to the research problem statement).

One important question was how events are currently being made sustainable by student event planners. This question included a variety of different responses, and the participants were free to choose all the sustainable initiatives which apply to their



events. Our suggestions included: “Use electronic communication to avoid excessive use of paper (95.5%); consider the accessibility of sustainable travel arrangements (i.e., public transit, bike lanes) to your event (45.5%); provide paper and container recycling (81.8%); provide compost (36.4%); offer plant-based food and drink options (90.9%); donate leftover food after the event (22.7%); provide reusable cups and recyclable napkins (40.9%); reuse supplies from your previous events (86.4%).

Another important piece of our information that we found out from our survey was that the main barrier for student event organizers in applying sustainability to their event planning process was the cost (86.4%). Another notable barrier is waste disposal; most student organizers seemed to try and limit waste to recycling and compost, or strived for zero waste, but there is often a lack of supervision and effort to help make sure waste is sorted properly.

An important question requested by the SO to be incorporated into the survey asked students’ opinions on implementing policy for sustainable event planning requirements at U o fT. From this method of data collection, we gathered that the majority of students (95.5%) seemed in favor of the idea. This response shows a promising and potential interest for a structured policy that aids student event organizers to make their events more sustainable, but the complex system of policy implementation is a slow process.

Overall, most of the ways student planners wanted support from the SO was through being provided with reusable materials that are accessible, gaining more structured protocols on what constitutes a sustainable event, and incentive potentially through clear demand from their participants to make events more sustainable (currently, only present 33.3% of the time).

### ***Workshop***

Our final method of data collection entailed participating as interviewers in a workshop organized by the SO, attended by selected stakeholders involved in various parts of the event planning process at U of T. The goal of this workshop was to gain insight into the event planning process, and to tease out recommendations and suggestions for allowing the consideration and implementation of sustainability in U of T

events. The SO was specifically interested in learning what event planners and service providers are already doing in terms of making sustainable choices in the event planning processes, the barriers to sustainability that they often face, and lastly, whether these stakeholders would be interested in an accreditation program for sustainable events, carbon-neutral event planning, and carbon offsets.

We had six guests at our workshop: individuals representing Student Life, the University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU), the President's Office, Emily Pimblett from Advancement Events, Catering and Event Services and ACE were in attendance to respond for their departments. Our guests were divided into three groups that were interviewed individually: 1) the President's Office and Advancement, 2) Student Life and the UTSU, and 3) ACE and St. George Catering. These actors were grouped together according to the role they play in the event planning process (e.g., ACE and catering are both service providers, Presidents' Office and Advancement plan similar events, etc.). Interviews were conducted by the group members, and questions were both tailored to each interviewee and informed by our clients' interests.

There were many interesting contradictions unveiled whilst discussing the responsibility of the service provider and the event planner in the disposal of waste. While ACE and Catering seemed to make it quite clear that waste disposal options were up to the discretion of the event planner, the President's Office and Advancement stressed the responsibility of waste disposal as the caterer's. The representative from Student Life claimed that waste bins are never ordered for events. Additionally the representative from Catering and Events expressed frustration over the composting services offered on campus. Some "compostable" plastics cannot be composted at U of T because U of T does not have the biodigester needed for this. There is a perception that U of T does not compost at all, when in fact coffee cups are composted, which is why there is a bin dedicated to coffee cups. Perhaps the advertisement and accessibility of composting at U of T must be highlighted in order for the efforts at Waste Services to be recognized. Therefore, it appears as though waste management lies at the heart of

many sustainability issues on campus – as the Sustainability Office had initially suspected.

Another important aspect of the event planning process that we learned through our interviews is that cost is the primary barrier to implementing sustainable practices in event planning. All participants noted cost barriers during their interviews; whether it is coming from the service provider or the event planning, saving money in some part of process seems to take precedence. Lack of information was also noted as a key barrier to making sustainable choices.

All of the stakeholders that were interviewed expressed interest in a third-party accreditation program – monetary or titular incentives seem to hold the potential to play an important role in the push for sustainable events at U of T. Since cost has been repeatedly noted as a barrier to sustainable event planning, a monetary incentive may mediate such a conflict. Interviewees also noted that an accreditation program also provides the opportunity to bolster the university's reputation as a leading and prominent academic institution. Despite the current lack of accreditation programs for sustainable events, however, most if not all of the workshop participants demonstrated a particular interest in working towards introducing sustainable practices into event planning at U of T.

### **Challenges:**

Our various methods of data collection, as described above, provided us with the opportunity to identify a host of key barriers that were experienced by stakeholders in event planning across different scales. This section aims to identify these barriers to adopting sustainable event planning practices.

The main challenge that this group faced from the document analysis was finding any resulting information about the design of any program or initiative, as well as finding any reported failures of sustainable practices. The reports and information which were published by each institution emphasized successes rather than indicating any shortcomings they have had or foreseen limitations in the future. This information was

not entirely representative of the process from program design to implementation due to these facts. Therefore it is difficult to accurately interpolate and analyse challenges that these institutions may have faced in their own processes of implementation.

In our workshop, we asked both key event planners (President's Office, Advancement & Convocation, the UTSU, and Student Life) and service providers (ACE, Catering & Services) about barriers to sustainability that they often encounter in the event planning processes. In our interview with the President's Office and Advancement, for example, the biggest challenges to incorporating sustainability into event planning were identified as cost and guest experience. In terms of cost, they were concerned about the perceived expenses involved in the transition from traditionally-run events to more sustainable events. Guest experience was also a key factor noted by the President's Office in terms of challenges. For example, many attendees specifically request red meat at events with food, and food waste disposal is completely unmonitored by event coordinators due to the appearance of garbage cans in the event space.

In our interview with ACE and Catering Services, representatives said they were able to provide strong recommendations to clients, but ultimately they cannot make decisions pertaining to events, as that agency lies in the hands of the event planner. Both representatives from this group also expressed frustrations concerning waste management. They worried that some products, specifically dishware and other single-use products, are labelled as compostable but are not actually able to be composted on St. George campus. Additionally, each college has their own catering services due to the decentralized environment of U of T, so it is difficult to coordinate sustainable practices with catering services.

We heard similar responses from Student Life and the UTSU. Representatives said when they tried to implement more sustainable event practices, there was quite a bit of uncertainty due to lack of information and communication between event stakeholders. Time was also noted as significant barriers to be considered, since sustainable practices often involve more time to adequately order and prepare necessary amenities. Representatives from this group also mentioned that events like

Orientation are too large in scale to appropriately organize and monitor sustainable practices. Similar to other groups interviewed, cost was also listed as a major barrier.

Participants in our online survey noted cost as the most significant barrier to planning sustainable events. Following cost, participants also stated that time and an unclear/uncommunicated demand for more sustainable events from attendees were key barriers in implementing more sustainable practices in their event planning. This result hints at a lack of communication between event stakeholders and attendees, as student organizers seem to be unsure about what their participants want in term of sustainable events on campus, hinting at a lack of communication. However, cost was again listed as the most significant barrier to planning sustainable events.

Based on the surveys and interviews we conducted with stakeholders in event planning on campus, we have categorized those responses into four key barriers: cost, time, access, and process. The cost was the most significant barrier for the stakeholders; interviewees repeatedly noted budgetary restrictions (or perceptions of budgetary restrictions). Similarly, students and event planners emphasized the challenge of time, mostly due to instances of last-minute planning. In terms of access, lack of information and lack of incentives were also noted as barriers to sustainability.

This group has gathered that currently there are many significant barriers to move to more sustainable events at U of T, namely issues of cost, time, and communication. The decentralized environment at U of T seems to be cause for a great number of challenges list by various representatives and respondents. This means it is more difficult to coordinate standardized policies on campus.

### **Recommendations:**

#### ***Recognition or Certification Strategy***

Three main tools are suggested for recognizing the sustainable events which could be conducted by a third party: 1) awards, 2) standards and Certifications, and 3) ranking models.

The Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), for instance, provides sustainability awards to the individuals and organizations leading

the higher education sustainability movement around the world. This is conducted with the help of volunteer judges from the community through a specific framework and indicators [8].

There are different local industry awards which have environmental or sustainability categories. Some of the stand-outs include [9]:

- A Greener Festival Award

<http://agreenerfestival.org>

- IMEX-GMIC Innovation in Sustainability Award

[www.imexexhibitions.com/awards/imex-awardsprogramme/green-awards/](http://www.imexexhibitions.com/awards/imex-awardsprogramme/green-awards/)

- *Green Operations Award*

<http://go-group.org>

- *Yourope's Clean'n'Green Award*

[www.yourope.org/en/go/introduction](http://www.yourope.org/en/go/introduction)

Standards and certifications can also be used for recognizing the events based on their sustainability performance. In fact, it is a great tool for event planners to use in moving from an ad hoc approach to a systematic one, providing credible external recognition of performance. Some universities such as McGill University has already developed a certificate for evaluating sustainable events.

*ISO 20121 Event Sustainability Management System, as another example, offers an event sustainability management framework which may be applied to an organization, an event planner, a single event, or a major supplier, etc [9]. It uses a systematic approach to addressing sustainable development issues related to event planning and production.*

In addition, there are some standards and certifications related to events [9]:

- *ASTM/APEX Standards*

[www.eventscouncil.org/APEX/APEXASTM.aspx](http://www.eventscouncil.org/APEX/APEXASTM.aspx)

- *Austrian Eco-label for Green Meetings*

<https://greenmeetings.umweltzeichen.at>

- *BNQ 9700-253* (Quebec)

<https://www.bnq.qc.ca/en/>

- *Creative Green*

[www.juliesbicycle.com/services/industry](http://www.juliesbicycle.com/services/industry)

- *CSA Z2010-10* (Canada)

[www.csagroup.org](http://www.csagroup.org)

The third tool is using a ranking model for sustainable events. For example, there is a Green Metric World University Ranking which gives credit to the universities that are making efforts to reduce their carbon footprint and taking steps to manage and improve their sustainability in order to combat global climate change [10]. Green Metric uses a uniform system through defining 6 main indicators and several sub indicators for ranking the universities:

1. Setting and Infrastructure (SI)
2. Energy and Climate Change (EC)
3. Waste (WS)
4. Water (WR)
5. Transportation (TR)
6. Education (ED)

Sustainability office can focus on such frameworks and indicators in order to develop a specific unique framework for evaluating the sustainable events systematically.

As well as document analysis, we performed in-person interviews with ACE separately, and then a workshop style interview session with the President's and Advancement office, waste and food services, as well as student life event organizers on campus, and an online survey targeted at student event organizers. One of the most

commonly brought up barriers to the planning of sustainable events was cost. The financial barrier is perceived to be extremely high, even for event planners with the most money like the President's Office, and the Office of Advancement. In order to lower this barrier, one of the most common solutions that was brought up was a form of incentive to promote sustainability such as a recognition or certification program so that the event organizers would have a way to communicate their efforts to attendees. This incentive will change the wide perception that there isn't money for sustainability, instead it will put people in the mindset that the money can be reallocated. According to the information received from the workshop event organizers would be interested in a 3<sup>rd</sup> party of some kind certifying events so that their efforts can not only be communicated to attendees but also to other universities. The online survey showed that 100% of student organizers would be interested in event certification.

Our overall recommendation to the Sustainability Office would be to develop a method of recognition or certification of events to allow for event organizers to communicate their sustainability efforts. This could be in the form of developing a relationship with a certification program at another school such as McGill that could be widely used to certify other events such as the one at U of T. Another way that events could be recognized would be by developing criteria such as those that are used to rank schools for sustainability like green metric mentioned above. Given that green metric already ranks other schools, it is a more objective and "3<sup>rd</sup> party" set of processes to recognize sustainability efforts at U of T events, given that there is no organization currently that individually certifies events for sustainability, that isn't already affiliated with a school like the one at McGill. The Sustainability office could further develop this recommendation by coming up with criteria that would be used to offer a sustainability certification or recognition program for U of T event organizers to participate in, offering an incentive to encourage more sustainable events.

## ***2. Suite of suggestions for managing perceptions of financial barriers.***

Cost and budgetary restrictions was identified as a barrier to implementing sustainability in event planning by the majority interviewed or surveyed for this project. The perception that choosing sustainable options is financially unattainable appears to



be prominent and consistent when considered against scalability: with larger events such as convocation requiring more financial investment than a faculty meeting. However, it is the smaller events such as student-led workshops or meetings that suffer from these financial barriers, and require positive steps forward can be taken to facilitate access to sustainable processes. Indeed, the representative from UTSU intimated that it is these smaller events that experience greater difficulty in finding the budget to order a green waste bin or to comply with U of T's bottled water ban. As such, it is clear that U of T should focus on utilizing one of its primary resources to help mitigate this concern. We recommend utilizing the student population to assist the SO in delivering sustainable education, coordination and logistics across campus. In creating a dedicated volunteer program, the SO could employ students to assist with managing the delivery, cleaning and aim to remove the specific barriers inhibiting small-scale events such as meetings, as well as the larger proceedings such as convocation.

The U of T's President's Advisory Committee on the Environment, Climate Change and Sustainability (CECCS) noted that it is "working on a plan to allow every U of T student, regardless of their program, to add a sustainability component to their studies", in order to help prosper a culture of sustainability within the university [13]. Through offering innovative opportunities to students and engaging the broader populace at U of T, there is greater potential to mitigate the problems that occur when attempting to make consistent change over a decentralized city campus. The SO could recruit a group of volunteers to mimic something like NYU's "EcoReps" for course credit could help to fill in hours of auditing, education and, if reasonably trained, consultation regarding environmental issues at events. Given that the representatives from ACE, the President's and Advancement Office all noted their desire for 1-1 consultation regarding the sustainability of their events, combining that desire with a program such as McGill's "waste educators" program could help to bridge the gap between the necessity of having educated officials around, while also offering the student's good experience without any additional cost. The results of our online survey do note a strong interest in sustainability and advocacy within the student populace at U of T, hinting at the fact that the potential for a future group of environmental consultants is reasonable.

Such a group could also help to broaden the application of leasing libraries, reusable serving ware (inclusive of refillable water jugs) and reusable decorations on the U of T campus. U of T currently has leasable dishes and serving ware at several buildings on campus, but it doesn't appear to be widely utilized and suffers from issues surrounding infrastructure. If this program were expanded and connected with the Sustainability Office's student volunteer program to offer a delivery and cleaning service for small-medium sized events on campus, this could help to eliminate the perceptive issues of cost, time and labor from event planners while also mitigating a sizable portion of single-use waste from these events. Given that the representatives from Catering and Events noted that it was 500% more expensive to lease reusable china for events and that a meeting of 30 people would require a \$40 water delivery fee just to supply that meeting; there is potential for both internal revenues to be generated if offered at a subsidized cost and run as a pilot project with sustainable volunteers. Moreover, the representatives from Student life and UTSU stated that cost and time are two of the primary barriers for them utilizing such a system, and that leasing reusable dishware is definitely "not in the budget" when planning events. When coupled with the views from the representatives from the President's Office and the Advancement Events, who both noted that reducing the amount of single-use plastics is at the forefront of sustainable event planning for them, it is clear that a more accessible leasing library of reusable dishes and serving ware could be an essential tool for enabling innovative change at campus events.

In analyzing the data collected from the interviews and online survey we conducted, we recommend the following suite of suggestions to help tackle the perceived financial burden planning sustainable events:

1. Create a suitable volunteer program inclusive of course credit or extra-curricular recognition in exchange for performing the tasks of sustainability officials across campus.
2. Offer the Sustainability Office's volunteers necessary training in order for them to act as sustainability consultants and offer each faculty 1-1 support in delivering a truly sustainable event.

3. Expand the leasing potential of U of T's reusable dishes and serving ware to include buildings in which planned events and meetings might occur, coupled with a delivery and cleaning service to remove barriers associated with time and labor.
4. Introduce a transparent, tiered pricing scheme for the leasing service that increases accessibility for student-led groups and events, while also meeting the financial needs of each faculty planner.

### ***3. Recommendations for developing better communication services between the SO and the event planner or service provider.***

Communication is arguably the most important factor in event planning, and this recommendation directly addresses that. Throughout all of the surveys and interviews conducted for this project, communication seemed to lie at the heart of most of the issues that made sustainable event planning a challenge for service providers and event planners alike. For example, one of the main problems when supplying sustainable events organization for Catering and Services was the lack of effective information tools to promote better waste management. Our participant from the department, Robert Grieve, discussed how materials that are often labelled as "compostable" cannot actually be composted on St. George campus. Grieve discussed how they tried to compost "compostable" wine tumbler from distributor, but were told by waste management services that the university lacked the proper equipment to do so. There is clearly a lack of awareness on waste sorting and non-compostable materials that ultimately misleads consumers by failing to specify the conditions which apply.

When disposing of the waste, event planners and service providers are often unable to ensure that attendees sort their waste properly, especially with larger events where no one is sorting waste after the fact. Due to the decentralized nature of the university, there is also a variation in management on a building-by-building basis in terms of waste disposal. Signage for waste facilities at an event also vary depending on both building management and event planner.

This group sees that it would therefore be best for the SO to provide event planners and service providers with supplementary and complementary communication resources in order to inform actors on the most sustainable choices. It is also recommended that the SO perhaps builds these resources in partnership with ACE, as all events at U of T have to go through ACE. This would allow for integration across different roles, as well as the joining of institutional scales, therefore creating opportunities for more open communication among actors involved in the planning process. This kind of open communication encouraged by the SO may also facilitate more clear and considerate discussion between different stakeholders of the St. George campus removed from ACE and the SO, which would allow for more efficient planning and provide opportunities to make more sustainable choices on a much broader scale.

After considering recommendations from interview and survey participants, we have created a short list of examples of communication services that the SO can provide to service providers and event planners.

1. A streamlined list of caterers approved by the SO based on a range of criteria pertaining to sustainability (e.g., caterers who compost leftover food, offer plant-based options, etc.).
2. A document curated by the SO that outlines waste management and sorting guidelines. This will specifically pertain to what can and cannot be recycled and composted on St. George campus, as well as recommendations for bin rentals according to event type and size.
3. A monthly or bimonthly newsletter sent by the SO to service providers and event planners that provides updated information on sustainable practices in event planning (e.g., whether purchasing new dishware is more sustainable than using up remainder of single-use dishware, etc.).

## **Conclusion:**

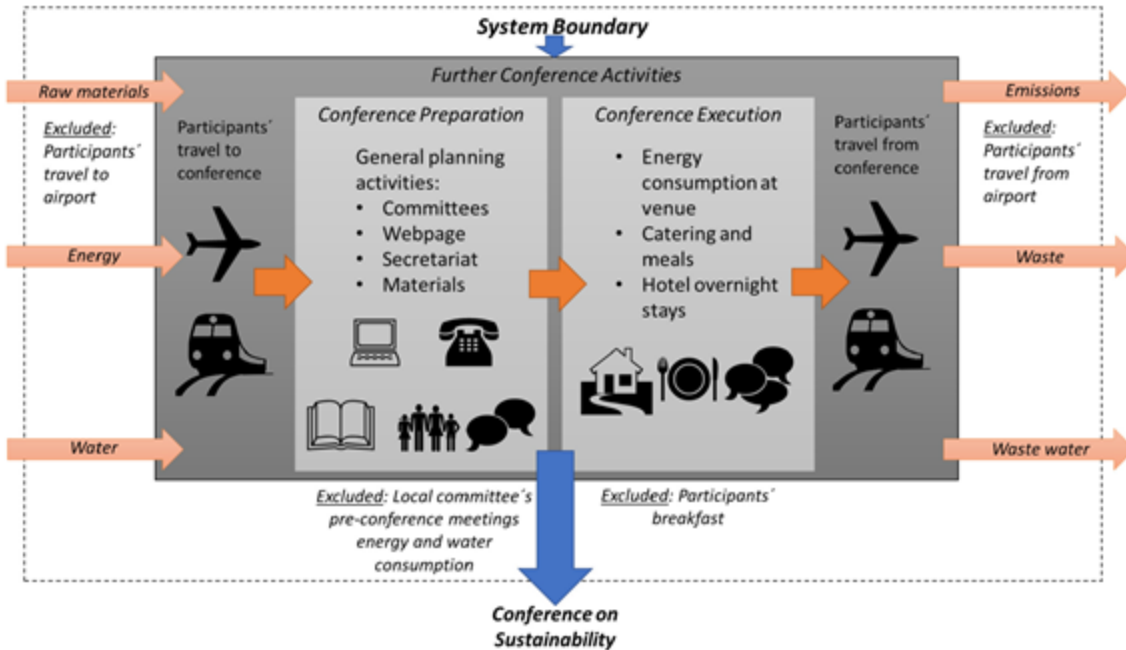
In conclusion, this preliminary work aims to act as insight into event planning processes, and provide recommendations to the SO to aid the development of a long-term sustainable events strategy at U of T. These recommendations can be further investigated by the SO to see which will be most successful when implemented, as well as which suggestions the event planning stakeholders would be most interested in. The future course of this project is intended to lead to cultivating a richer culture of sustainability at U of T overall, through targeting sustainable event planning processes and execution.

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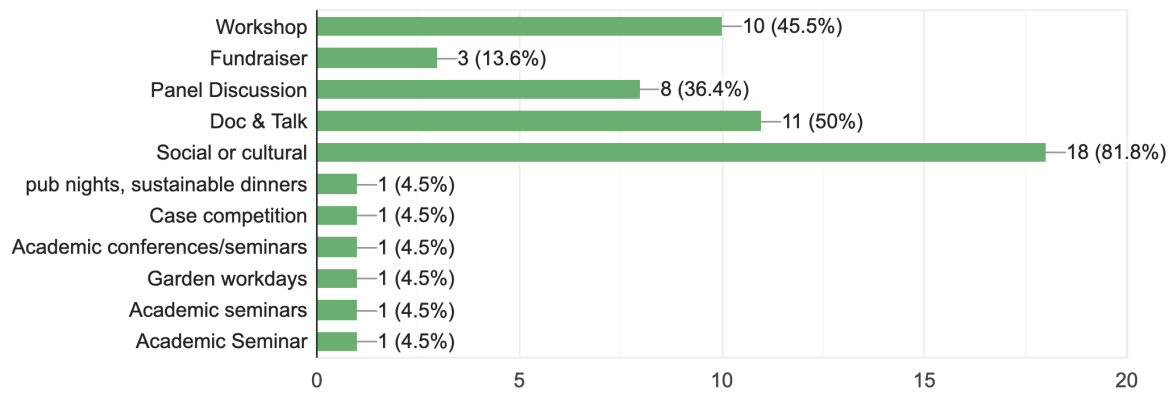
## **Appendix**



**Fig. 1.** System boundary of the Life Cycle Assessment study of an international conference on sustainability [2] - Appendix

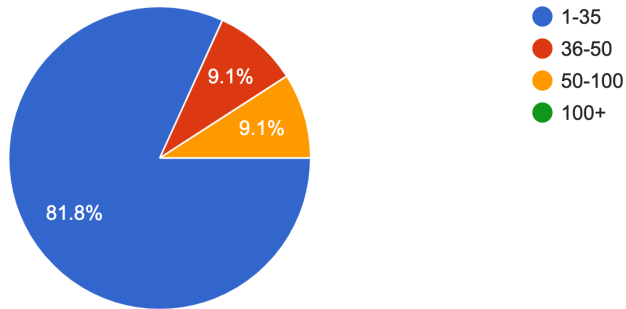
Online Survey Question Responses (15 Questions in 5 Sections)

What type of events do you normally host? Please check all that apply.  
22 responses



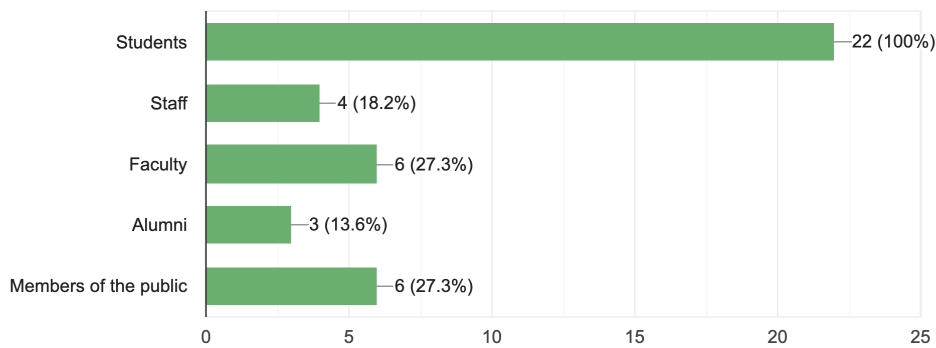
What's the average size of your events?

22 responses



Who do you run these events for? Please check all that apply.

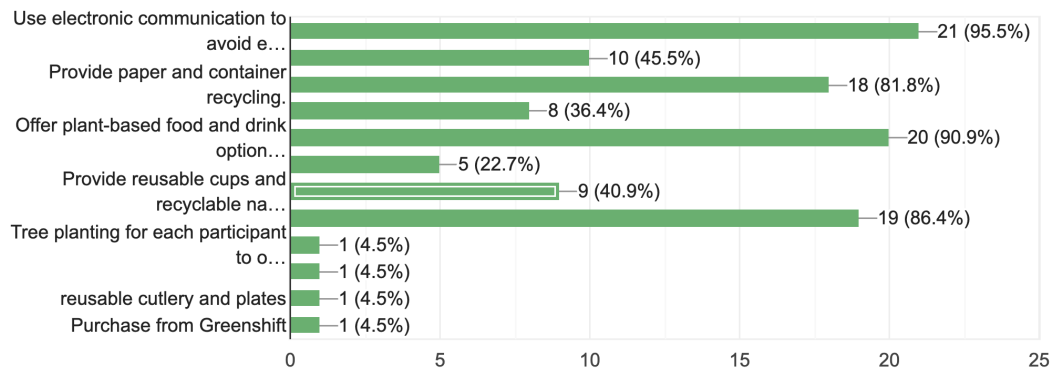
22 responses



Sustainability in Event Planning

Do you consider "sustainability" in your event planning? If so, what decisions/ relating to sustainability are you already doing? Please check all that apply.

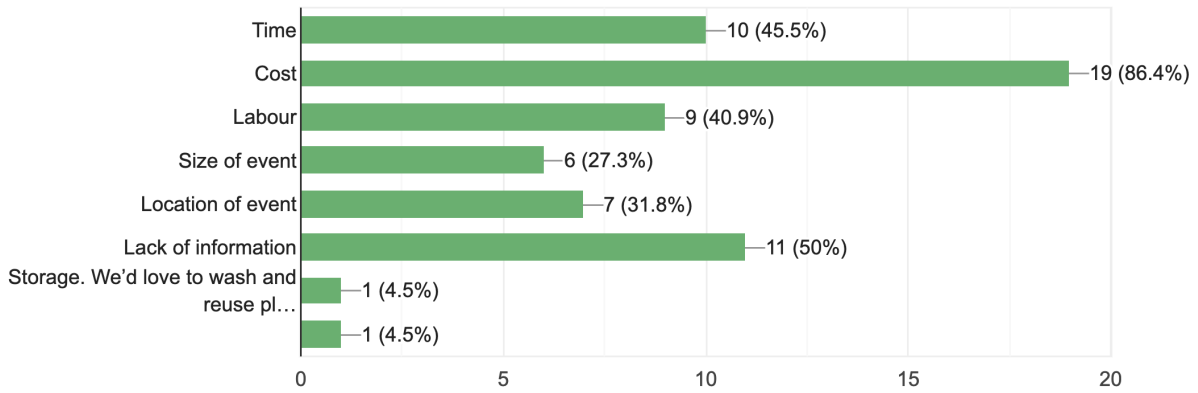
22 responses





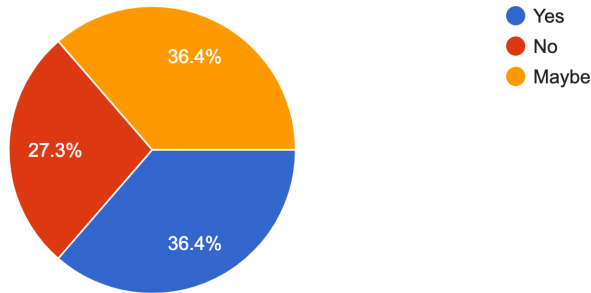
What barriers do you find you face in applying sustainability in the event-planning process? Please check all that apply.

22 responses



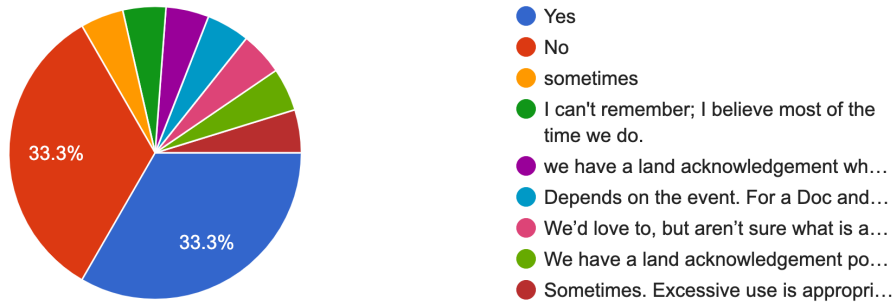
Do you feel that attendees are aware of these sustainable efforts?

22 responses



Do you have a Indigenous Land Acknowledgement before your events?

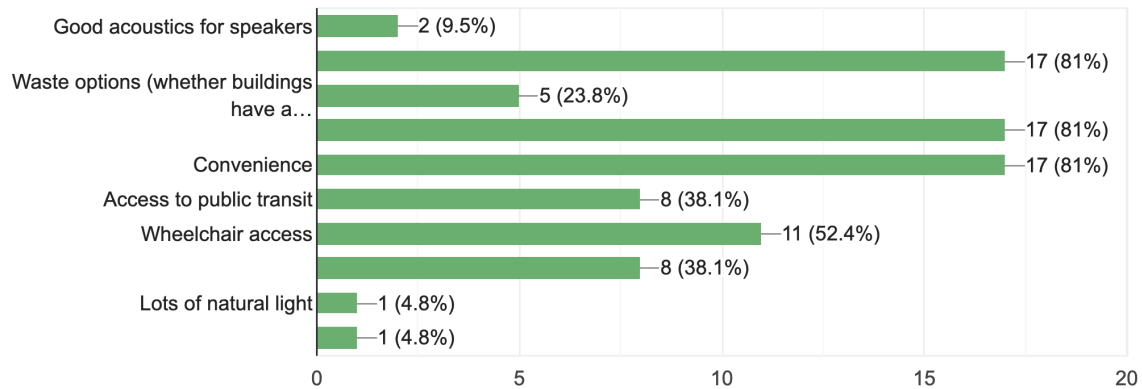
21 responses



Venue Section

How do you choose a venue? What characteristics do you look for in a venue?

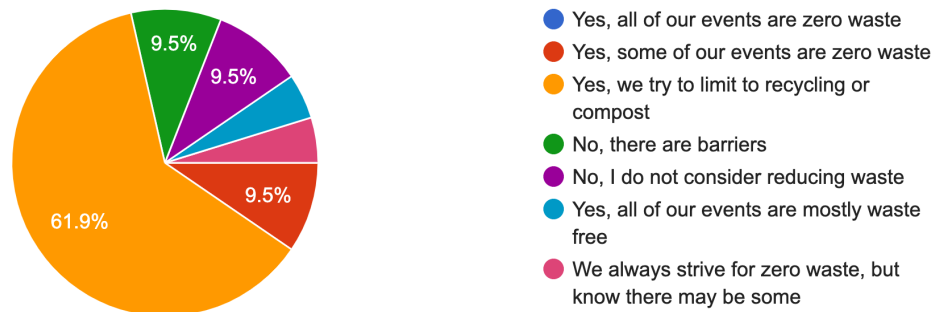
21 responses



Waste Section

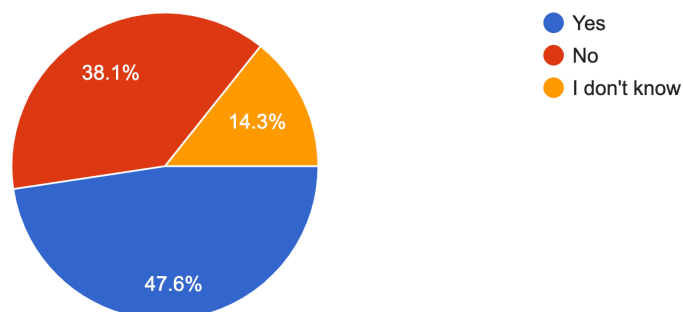
Do you try to reduce waste at your events? If yes, what considerations do you? If no, why?

21 responses



Do you have access to green bins to dispose of organic waste?

21 responses



## Opportunities Section

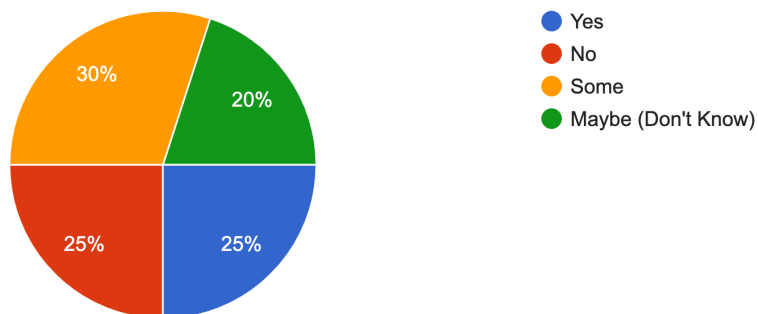
What do you think are some benefits to having sustainable event planning processes?

- more people come who are interested and environmentally conscious. Students are often more conscious than public and faculty, especially when the event itself is
- Yes!
- Having a generous budget, lots of time to prepare, sustainable infrastructure already in place (i.e. compost available, reusable dishes and utensils)
- Makes sustainability more accessible by providing resources
- Better for environment, creates awareness for sustainability.
- We are a group that advocates for sustainability so we absolutely must walk the talk and host events that align with our values
- Normalizes sustainability as an everyday decision
- A better future

- It gets everyone to be more aware of sustainability, not only the student organization, but also the attendees and faculty.
- Being aware of the impact that a small event can make (many small events can add up) & exploring the small changes that can be made
- Normalizes sustainability efforts thus creating a chain effect (people who attend are more likely to make sustainable choices in their personal life and other events that they plan)
- It reduces our negative impact on the environment
- They are a form of praxis in connecting equity to environmental sustainability. Living out our values.
- It's our responsibility to reduce our footprint seeing as we not only represent and serve the student population at Vic, but we are all responsible for our collective future.
- Reducing waste
- - Protecting the planet!
- - showing that our organization values the environment
- It's really important to normalize sustainable events, to integrate all aspects of sustainability (beyond environmental) into every part of the event planning process - especially as a cafe that places sustainable practices at its core.
- Good habit to get into
- Makes people feel good about attending, further encouraging attendance and increasing public relations. Makes people aware of their carbon footprint.
- Reducing waste and carbon emissions, creating a sustainable and healthy space for students
- It normalizes the topic of sustainability in event planning despite the organization, club, or event.
- It is beneficial for advertisement of events and is necessary for environmental clubs to participate in

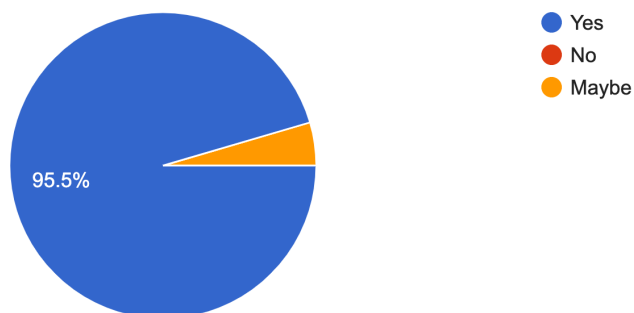
Is there a demand from attendees for sustainable events?

20 responses



Would you be open to having to follow a policy for implementing sustainability in event planning at U of T?

22 responses



What tools or resources do you think would help you plan sustainable events in the future?

- more reusable options
- More assistance from ASSU to make events sustainable
- Easier access to more sustainable producers (i.e. that use less packaging) to buy products from
- I am part of the VUSAC sustainability Commission. We have a VUSAC sustainability policy and checklist for events. We do refer to other university's event planning guidelines sometimes.
- Application giving access to sustainable resources and practices.
- More updated and consolidated information on sustainability in event planning; more access or subsidies to rent dishware, glasses etc

- Catering that provides reusables, encourages BYO Container for taking food home, cost-effective list of places to buy eco-friendly products where necessary, e.g. napkins, plate and utensil rental (including delivery and take-away)
- Reusable cutlery and straws
- Reusable cutlery and straws
- Collection of resources/ list of companies and restaurants that are sustainable and are willing to work with student organizations, like Veda.
- ASSU meeting at the beginning of the semester going over sustainable options. Lots of student union events use disposable materials and aren't conscious of waste.
- compost bins that can be rented for free, venues surrounding campus making sustainable choices attainable (particularly pubs on ASSU's pub list)
- More resources and information about existing resources/ways to lead a sustainable event.
- lack of pooled resources that are available (such as name tags), a list of suggestions for what to do to host a more sustainable event and what resources on campus already provide these resources
- More collaboration with physical plant, more support staff from the UofT sustainability office, more funding for sustainable projects (not programming, but permanent initiatives), and better access to resources that would allow us to hold sustainable events.
- Providing a list of sustainable places we can order food from on campus, like Caffiends. Information on where to get compostable cutlery/plates for food, maybe even subsidizing the cost, as a lot of student unions have a tight budget.
- Information about how to request green bins at U of T, general tips on how to make events sustainable at u of t, resources available
- More info available to student event planners on acquiring proper bins for waste sorting. A more accessible events guide.
- A guidebook
- Funding. Centralized system of purchasing sustainable, affordable utensils and dinnerware. More rental services e.g. hot water urns, bowls and platters. Have a deposit placed beforehand to ensure items are returned in one piece.
- Guides/outlines/procedures for sustainable events available online
- Access to reusable cutlery, compost bins
- Some more tools and direct procedures to planning a green event



## Sustainable Events Guide

The Sustainable Events Guide is a resource for all event organizers and planners to help make U of T events more conscious and inclusive.

### Choose an accessible venue with green travel options

- Select a venue equipped with accessible entrances and restrooms.
- Choose a venue that is well serviced by public transit and pedestrian/cyclist paths.
- Consider teleconferencing as an option for out-of-town guests. Encourage carpooling.
- Reduce energy use by hosting your event during the day or outdoors to utilize natural light.

### Provide local, seasonal, plant-based food & beverages; Limit food waste

- Request RSVP and dietary restrictions from guests.
- Provide vegan/vegetarian/plant-based meal options. If serving meat, avoid over-ordering quantities.
- Choose locally grown, seasonal, organic and/or fair trade foods and beverages.
- Donate leftovers or bring empty containers for take-away to avoid food waste.
- Ensure compost bins are available and visible for food scraps.

### Strive for a zero waste event: Provide reusables, and limit single-use items

- Talk to your caterers about your zero-waste goal!
- Encourage attendees to bring reusable bottles/mugs.
- Serve beverages in re-fillable jugs. (Remember: U of T is a bottled water free campus!)
- Eliminate individually packaged items, like bottled beverages, disposable coffee creamers, and condiments.
- Provide reusable plates, cups, and utensils. If using disposables, choose 100% paper plates or recyclable materials. (Beware black-coloured plastics and bioplastics; they are not recyclable or green-bin safe in the City of Toronto or on campus.)
- Provide specific waste sorting instructions at the event via signage, presentation slide, or announcement.

### Go paperless: Utilize digital communications

- Digitize event publicity, invitations, and signage; use e-invites, e-registration and digital check-in.
- Refuse to give out single-use promotional/swag and handouts.
- Provide attendees with digital agenda/packages to limit printing. Include transit travel instructions.
- Print double-sided on (postconsumer) recycled paper, if needed.

### Set-up for success: Minimize décor, re-use supplies, use clear signage, and provide proper waste bins

- Minimize waste from decorations by aiming for a minimalist set-up.
- Borrow supplies, like from U of T's [Lanyard Lending!](#) Ask guests to return name tags for future events.
- Locate public drinking-water fountains at event grounds.
- Ensure recycling and waste bins are available and clearly labelled. Request additional bins if necessary by submitting a [service order](#).
- Communicate your efforts and commitment to a green event!

We wish you success with your event!  
Still have questions? Contact us: [sustainability@utoronto.ca](mailto:sustainability@utoronto.ca)  
@sustainableUofT

### Proposal to Event Stakeholders

The Sustainability Office's mandate is to foster collaboration and a culture of sustainability, provide strategic direction, service and continual improvement ethos as expression of strategic priorities of Facilities and Services across departments, faculties and physical infrastructure.

The Sustainability Office (SO) is working with students from ENV461 course with Prof. John Robinson on a Living Labs project to develop a survey strategy for the Sustainability Office who will go on to consult U of T stakeholders on sustainable event practices and how best to develop a framework for sustainable events at U of T as part of a broader, multi-year Sustainable Event Strategy.

### Sustainable Events Strategy Rationale

The Sustainability Office as part of Facilities and Services, as well as event organizers as project managers, are implementers and strategically important to achieving U of T's sustainability targets and goals. Consulting event stakeholders is a means to determine conditions for successful implementation of sustainable event practices within U of T's decentralized system, community and culture.

Having ongoing dialogue and a consultative relationship with event organizers, raises awareness, fosters collaboration and community vitality, while addressing sustainability goals as an expression of the University of Toronto's values.

### Sustainable Events Initial Gathering & Speed Semi-structured Interviews

Tuesday Oct 15 2-4pm

256 McCaul St., 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, room 233

#### Proposed Agenda

2:00pm – 2:05pm: introductions,

2:05pm – 2:20pm: introduction of U of T context and SO Sustainable Event Strategy,

2:20pm – 2:30pm: discuss event guide and living lab project goals (what is not known and we would like to learn),

2:30pm – 4:00pm: semi-structured 'speed interviews' with students (broken out into groups of stakeholders with similar process/requirements/considerations)

The Sustainability Office working with students on Living Lab project, would like to consult event planners and organizers using the sustainable event guide for reference, to;

- learn the degree to which key event stakeholders are considering sustainability in their event practices,
- learn how they might wish to evaluate the environmental impact of their events,
- ascertain perceived barriers and opportunities to reducing the environmental impact of events,
- determine what tools, resources would support their efforts (including incentives, access to consultation and removal of barriers to wider adoption of sustainable practices);
- determine how they might (wish to) communicate their efforts and the benefits of producing events more sustainably.

The students conducted a focused interview with Sarah Reid, Associate Director at ACE, so as to consider processes undertaken and roles performed by each stakeholder who is participating in the Nov. 19<sup>th</sup> gathering, in order for students to consider their research and design their interview questions in the context specific to the event stakeholder.

Students will distill the findings from these interviews, along with findings from an online survey with student event organizers. They are also gathering insights from other university Sustainability Offices (who have engaged with event stakeholders) to establish sustainable event programs (including certification programs). They will produce a final report in December for the Sustainability Office, to inform the broader Sustainable Event Strategy and consultation with U of T event stakeholders going forward into next year.



We hope Living Lab outcomes will Inform/determine what sustainability goals are achievable for the SO to

- a. develop a roadmap with all stakeholders
- b. Identify stakeholders interested to advise and consult on an ongoing basis and
- c. Identify mutually desirable sustainability goals to inform development of a pilot program approach (eg. Certification, or benchmark framework) and update event guidelines generally (eg. For office meetings).

For students, this project is an opportunity to apply what they have been learning, and will give them direct experience interviewing key U of T stakeholders and event professionals, rehearse consulting with a client (the Sustainability Office), learn about sustainable event practices as well as processes in U of T's decentralized environment.

#### **Student Team**

**Ali Beynaghi** is a PhD student in the Department of Civil and Mineral engineering at University of Toronto with a general interest in sustainability science with respect to futures studies, energy, climate change, social sciences and (higher) education. A key area of his research examines incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the process of scenario development especially for community engagement in dealing effectively with climate change.

He has over 10 publications among book chapters, papers published in refereed journals and presented at international conferences.

**Megan Davies** is a 4th year Biodiversity and Conservation biology student minoring in environmental biology and Anthropology. She is one of the co-presidents of the Environmental Students Union at U of T making her an event planner herself which has made her personally dedicated to sustainable event planning. Megan is passionate about the environment and approaching it from interdisciplinary perspectives which is what directed her to this project working with the Sustainability office and working with other event planners.

**Scout Deurwaarder** is a current post-graduate environmental student focusing on sustainable food systems within a policy context. Scout's interests lie in the intersection of sustainability and the politics regarding food sovereignty and security; envisioning how the future of food is going to look as the climate becomes less forgiving and resources begin to diminish. Scout is also the program manager of the Fair Food Challenge, a social non-profit that works with Australian universities to promote healthy and sustainable food environments on various campuses, and is active in the youth food movement within Melbourne, Australia.

**Rachel Kim** is an undergraduate student majoring in both Environmental Studies and Human Geography, and minoring in Urban Studies. Rachel's interests lie in the environmental friendly planning and sustainable development. Previous years, Rachel was actively involved in student politics in the student council and extra-curricular activities in many clubs at University of Toronto. From these experiences she gained variety of skills, especially in planning big events.

**Chelsey Liu** is a third year student doing a double major in Political Science and Environmental Studies. She has always had a passion for environmental sustainability, environmental policy and indigenous environmental relations in Canada. She is an external advocacy director for UofT Environmental Action, focusing on creating workshops to allow students to take policy action on environmental issues like climate change. Chelsey is also a work study student with the Sustainability Office, and is working on the implementation and ongoing development of environmental engagement programming as representative of the Sustainability Office with the wider campus community.

**Madeleine Reyno** is in her fourth and final year at the University of Toronto, and will graduate with a Human Geography specialist and a major in Environmental Studies. She was born and raised in the heart of the Niagara region, and as a result her interests lie within agricultural labour practices and migrant justice. She is the Volunteer Relations Director at Caffiends, a student-run cafe on Victoria College campus that focuses on direct trade relations and sustainability. Upon finishing her undergraduate degree, Madeleine aspires to pursue a career in the education field, as it is her primary goal to make education in the field that she is passionate about accessible to youth.

Workshop stakeholder Matrix  
**Sustainable Events Living Lab**

**Initial Gathering and Speed Semi-formal Interviews with U of T Event Stakeholders, Nov. 19<sup>th</sup> 2-4pm**

Stakeholder	Type	Interview focus	Team Lead
<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Ongoing with Networks</b>		
Student Life representative  UTSU representative	Primarily Student audience Develop events like orientation (w ACE logistics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Constrained by budget &amp; access but</li> <li>- guests have high expectations – guest perceptions, participation, experience counts for a lot</li> </ul> <p><u>Actionable areas re sustainability:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- material consumption (low waste &amp; sorting, reusable/ low impact swag)</li> <li>- travel options (public transit, shared vehicle, cycling, walking)</li> <li>- food (minimizing waste)</li> <li>- cultural (accessible, respectful of indigenous)</li> </ul>	Ali and Rachel
<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Ongoing Representational</b>		

<p>University Events Office of the President representative + intern</p> <p>Advancement Events representative</p>	<p>- High profile Representative (eg. President's residence) - Governance &amp; Executive, - Host &amp; International audiences - Alumni engagement Fundraising</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have least constraints (eg. Budget, make decisions, have priority access)</li> <li>- Ratings &amp; competition with other universities considered as well as UC3</li> </ul> <p><u>Actionable areas re sustainability:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- material consumption (avoid waste, high value/reusable/ low environmental impact swag)</li> <li>- travel options ((they will incur GHGs from air travel and questions around GHG calculation and interest in offset)</li> <li>- food (seasonal, local, low enviro impact, fair trade)</li> <li>- cultural (respectful of indigenous, heritage/ tradition, accessible, intergenerational)</li> </ul>	<p>Megan</p>
<p><b>Group 3</b></p>	<p><b>Ongoing &amp; Episodic</b></p>		

<p>Catering &amp; Event Services representative</p> <p>ACE representative</p>	<p>- Event Organizing &amp; logistics services for internal &amp; external clients/ stakeholders</p> <p>- Help organize + know requirements of many smaller events + meetings (90% of U of T events)</p> <p>- Communicate rules &amp; process requirements to clients &amp; guests</p> <p>- Have infrastructure for commerce (and cost recovery)</p> <p>- Have most contact &amp; communications with all (from first intake, to post event evaluation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can give insight to incentives that would be attractive to clients (and service providers), tools/support that could be made available for them to share with clients and guests to make more sustainable decisions,</li> <li>- Know all the rules (internal processes + constraints, as well as external regulations like health+ safety, City bylaw enforcement + services eg. Permits &amp; zoning</li> <li>- Budgets and capacity are constrained but have big mandates = more creative and part of more networks</li> </ul> <p><u>Actionable areas re sustainability:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have had to get creative/ resources to meet needs of clients with limited capacity, budgets &amp; space constraints &amp; know threshold of what is acceptable/desirable by clients, vendors, suppliers, service provider</li> <li>- Have communications channels (ACE portal, Dining Menu screens etc.)</li> <li>- Can speak to/interface most with waste services, provide insight into what does/doesn't work with signage &amp; 'policing' on site with guests</li> <li>- Can give unique insight into evaluation, what would be of interest, what would be required, give examples (eg. Footprint calculator, eco-certification, post event analysis).</li> <li>- Accessibility and health &amp; safety are big part of their planning considerations</li> <li>- Cultural (dietary &amp; accessible, enforce bottle water ban, develop strategies for guests to have sustainable options eg. Menu, equipment,</li> </ul>	<p>Maddy and Chelsey</p>
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