



Green Events Handbook

University of Rochester Sustainability Office

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Background

Events can be a great way to bring people together and engage your audience. However, they can also be sources of lots of unnecessary waste, from food to materials to energy. By incorporating sustainable practices from the beginning of the event planning process, you can minimize your event's environmental impact, showcase your group's attention to detail, and demonstrate to your attendees that having a culture of sustainability is possible.

This handbook offers guidelines to help make events held at the University of Rochester more sustainable.

For questions about sustainability at Rochester, email sustainability@rochester.edu.

Event planning

Choosing a venue

Accessibility considerations

Choose a location that is easily accessible by foot, bicycle, or public transportation. Consider which venues are the easiest-to-access for your audience, depending on where they are coming from.

Lighting considerations

Select event spaces that offer natural daylighting and minimize the need for artificial indoor lights. Hirst Lounge and the Eisenberg Rotunda are great choices on River Campus!

For evening events, opt for low-voltage lamps or LED stage lighting.

Equipment rental

Rent supplies and equipment from campus or external companies instead of purchasing new items.

Food & beverages

Choosing the menu

- Opt for sustainable food choices, prioritizing healthy, local, plant-based, and seasonal options.

- Ensure the event menu includes vegan and substantial vegetarian options by default.
- When ordering catering, inquire about and choose caterers who focus on sustainable, locally sourced ingredients and eco-friendly disposable products.
 - Ask your caterer to make eco-friendly accommodations. Some caterers have more sustainable packaging or serve ware as an option, but do not advertise it or include it as a default option. If you have made plans to use reusable or bulk items, make sure to let your caterer know that you do not need utensils, sauce packets, etc.
 - **Tip:** The big aluminum trays supplied for catering are recyclable. Wash them/clear them of food waste before recycling in the regular recycling bin. If you cannot ensure they are clean and empty, it is best to put them in the trash.

Reducing waste

- Minimize food waste by accurately estimating attendance and designing catering orders strategically.
- Use reusable tablecloths and napkins instead of disposable ones.
- Choose washable ware over disposables for serving. Single-use plastic and paper can be convenient, but taking an extra 15 minutes to do dishes after an event can save a lot of waste. Try to use reusable cups, plates, bowls, silverware, and serving items (trays, tongs, serving spoons, etc.) wherever possible.
- If washable ware isn't feasible and you have arranged for composting services (see *General Waste Reduction*), use compostable cups, plates, napkins, utensils, and other service-ware. **Note that if compostable ware is not composted, it does not break down in the landfill, and it is not recyclable.**
- If takeaway containers are feasible and permitted, let participants know beforehand so they can bring their own container to fill and take home. Consider providing compostable or low-waste options (e.g., paper).
- Reduce or eliminate individual food packaging by ordering in bulk and serving food on reusable, communal platters whenever possible.
- Omit bottled water and other beverages; use pitchers or reusable dispensers instead. Encourage attendees to bring their own reusable water bottles.

A note on cups: In Monroe County, plastic and paper cups are not recyclable. Bring reusable cups or try recyclable alternatives like [cups made from aluminum](#), which is recyclable in the regular recycle bin.

- Avoid using straws unless there is an accessibility-related need for them. If you do need to use straws, consider reusable or compostable ones.

- Avoid condiments, snacks, and cutlery that are individually wrapped in plastic. If using bulk single-use cutlery, allow guests to choose which utensil they need rather than providing everyone with a fork, knife, spoon, and straw. They might not use them all.

General waste reduction

- If holding an event on University property, check that your event space has adequate recycling infrastructure. If it is lacking, contact the Sustainability Office for help (sustainability@rochester.edu).
- Consider requesting composting services. The Sustainability Office can help with setting up the infrastructure to help individual events be zero waste. Note that this may incur a cost depending on the scale of the event.
- Avoid Styrofoam in any form (plates, trays, cups, bowls, decorations, or other products).
- Purchase all materials in bulk to reduce packaging waste and transportation emissions.

Transportation

- Encourage alternative transportation; send invitees links to campus buses; set up carpooling if the event is far away; or promote public transit, walking, and biking.
- If providing transportation, opt for the least number of vehicles. Ensure carpools are full before leaving.

Communications and promotion

- Prioritize digital communications through email, social media, online forms for RSVPs, and digital signage. For University audiences, advertisements can be shared on screens around University buildings using [these instructions from Event and Classroom Management](#).
- Reduce printed materials for your event. If printing is necessary, print double-sided on 100% recycled content paper (minimum 30% post-consumer recycled content, or FSC-certified paper).
- Avoid using foil, lamination, or other effects that make printed materials unrecyclable.
- For recurring or annual events, think about what items can be reused from year to year. Avoid printing dates on signs, posters, and banners so they can be reused.
- Distribute brochures and handouts only upon request.
- Decrease margins and font size to optimize paper usage if printing.
- Offer video or phone call-ins for guests/speakers not living in the area.

- Email event schedules/timelines to attendees instead of printing them.
- Send out digital thank you cards rather than printed ones.
- Let event participants, vendors, and sponsors know about your sustainability efforts and goals for the event. Promote your sustainability efforts through social media, websites, blogs, and interactions with campus partners. The Sustainability Office is happy to repost your efforts to spread the word!

Giveaway items

Did you know that ‘swag’ actually stands for Stuff We All Get? There are lots of ways to provide rewards or promote your group without giving away items that will end up unused and in the landfill. Consider following the below hierarchy, **ordered from best to worst options**, to choose what to give away at your event. *Guidance adapted from “[Guidelines for Sustainable SWAG at Duke](#)”.*

1. No physical items

- Stop and think: do you need to give something away? Instead, offer experiences (e.g., tours, tickets, classes), food (e.g., event catering, raffle for dinner), or training/activities (e.g., workshops, games).

2. Upcycled or reused items

- If providing a physical item, prioritize giving materials a second life.
- *Examples:* Items from thrift stores/resale shops, clothing swaps, screen printing on owned clothing.

3. Raffle a few high-quality items or experiences

- Instead of giving something to everyone, raffle a few durable, valuable items or unique experiences. This can increase engagement while reducing overall consumption.
- *Examples:* Sustainable high-quality apparel, a nice houseplant, or local experiences.

4. New items that are functional, durable, and ethical

- If new, branded items are necessary, ensure they are useful, long-lasting, and responsibly sourced.
- *Key considerations:* Ethically sourced, made from local materials, have recycled content, low-emission manufacturing, minimal packaging, and from producers with clear sustainability goals.

- *Examples:* High-quality reusable water bottles, coffee mugs, pens, or notebooks; durable tote bags; reusable utensils.

5. Low-resource/cost items

- If providing an item to everyone, choose items with a minimal impact (few resources used and low cost).
- *Examples:* Stickers, temporary tattoos, reusable sporks/straws, bookmarks, postcards, pens, reusable coffee cup sleeves, small consumables.

6. Useless and questionable items

- Do not provide plastic trinkets or trendy, disposable items that are likely to end up in landfills. Ensure the items align with your organization's purpose.
- *Examples to avoid:* Fidget spinners, slap bracelets, plastic pompoms, balloons, cheap keychains, plastic cups/bottles.

Pro Tip: Always question the necessity of swag items. When purchasing, ask vendors about their sustainability practices.

Day of the event

Waste management

- Ensure proper waste bin setup with clear, easy-to-read labels for landfill, recycling, and (if present) compost bins. If the event has been designed such that nearly everything is recyclable and/or compostable, it is suggested to place the recycling and/or compost bins out more prominently than the trash bin. However, they should still be placed near trash bins to prevent contamination.
- Make sure there is at least one recycling bin for every landfill bin, and place bins in easily accessible, grouped areas.
- If you have set up composting services, ensure compost bins are equipped with compostable bin liners.
- Remind guests how to properly sort waste, recycling, and compost.
- Collect unused materials and store them for future events.
- At the end of the event, collect lanyards and badge holders for reuse.

Energy conservation

- Opt for mood lighting by turning off unnecessary lights.

- Turn off electronic equipment (including projectors and lights) when not in use and before exiting the event space.
- Make sure the thermostat is set appropriately for the event, finding a compromise between comfort and energy efficiency. We recommend keeping the thermostat at at least 75 degrees in the summer and 68 degrees maximum in the winter, but recognize that what is comfortable may differ depending on the room's insulation and window placement.
 - If you get uncomfortable and there is heating/cooling in the event space, [contact Facilities](#) to have them change the temperature.
 - Keep windows and doors closed when heating or AC is on.
- Utilize in-house audio-visual options to project important information.
- Assess your space before the event starts to look for small ways to conserve energy.

Decorations

- Try to use what you already have available rather than buying new. If you do buy new, buy decorations that could be used for different events and are not extremely specific. Opt for decorations that are durable; avoid decorating with 'kitschy' or cheap trendy items.
- Use natural or reusable decor, such as potted plants or cut flowers (preferably locally grown or organic).
- Utilize reused materials for decorations (e.g., from surplus or thrift stores, or borrow from other groups).
- Avoid balloons and disposable tablecloths (paper, plastic, vinyl).
- Keep decorations for your next event instead of throwing them out.

Post-event actions

Food and material recovery

- Have a plan for what to do with leftover food (donate to students, staff members, or a local food pantry).
- For large events where a large quantity of leftover food is possible, look into food recovery services from organizations like the [Food Recovery Network](#).
- Make sure you save materials that can be reused for future events.

Sustainability evaluation

- Evaluate the event and share findings with your team. Highlight what sustainable features went well and what can be improved upon for future events.
- If sending out feedback forms to event participants, include questions about sustainability to see what people took away from the event setup or suggestions for how to improve.
- Calculate the carbon footprint of the event and share that information with participants. There are many paid calculators for this online, but the [City of Denver offers one for free](#).
- Share this information with the Sustainability Office! We are always glad for the opportunity to work with your or your group and to share success stories!