

# Improving Sustainability and Reducing Carbon Emissions in Student Events at HBS

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Here at HBS, fostering a vibrant student community is paramount. From conferences that spark inspiration to section gatherings that build connections, these events are critical to the HBS experience. HBS has about 20 student-run conferences for 2023 – 2024 academic year, with 200+ people attending most of these conferences. In addition, students organize weekly activities for their sections. As Student Sustainability Associates (SSAs), we want to enable these student events to continue to bring value to students and attendees while considering the environmental impact traditional event planning can have. Restaurant Associates (RA) has put substantial effort into creating sustainable options for campus events, but students are not currently maximizing the benefits available.

To tackle this issue, our project followed a three-pronged approach:

1. **Understanding the Current Landscape:** We delved into the existing event planning process for student conferences, and club/section events and drew a process flow. This gave us a clearer picture of how these events are typically planned.
2. **Identifying Key Emission Drivers:** Once we understood the event planning flow, we identified the key areas where student events contribute most to the carbon footprint.
3. **Developing Sustainable Solutions:** Armed with this knowledge, we proposed practical actions that can be integrated into the event planning process. These interventions will be designed to minimize environmental impact without compromising the quality or budget of student events.

While we have done research on both the student conference and club/section event, we decided to zoom in on the student conferences as they draw the most attendees and are run by a relatively centralized process, which makes interventions easier to implement.

## Main Challenges to Event Sustainability

Based on interviews with student conference organizers, we identified two main hurdles that prevent students from prioritizing sustainability in event planning:

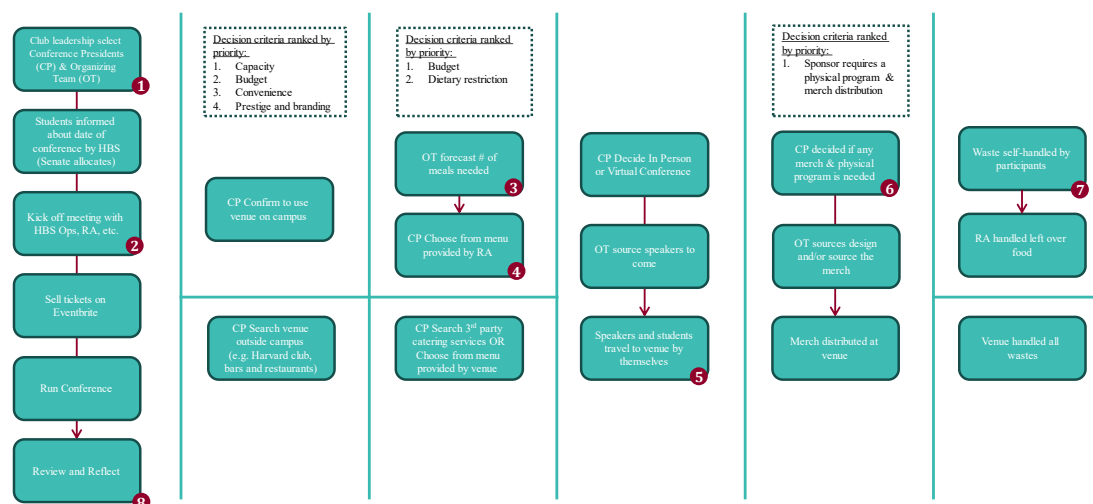
- Limited Time and Lack of Easy-to-Digest Guidance:** Students juggle busy schedules and sustainability can easily get pushed aside amidst other logistical concerns while planning events. While there are existing guidelines to improve event sustainability, students either aren't aware of these guidelines or don't understand the most impactful actions to take because they don't have a singular resource that lists these out.
- Balancing Sustainability with Revenue Generation:** Many student events, particularly conferences, serve as a crucial fundraising tool for club activities. There's a concern that implementing sustainable practices might increase event costs, potentially jeopardizing revenue generation.

Our project recognizes these challenges. We're committed to finding sustainable solutions that are not only effective but also **low-cost and time-efficient**. By working with student groups and event organizers, we aim to develop a set of best practices that prioritize sustainability while remaining financially responsible.

## Process Flow Analysis

Following our three-prong approach, we began by meticulously mapping the entire event planning process, from initial team formation to post-event reflection. Simultaneously, we pinpointed several key areas of student events that contribute most to carbon footprint as well as major consideration factors that event organizers have when making their decisions (See below process flow diagram).

**Graph 1: Student Conference Process Flow**



As indicated in the process flow, we identified several major carbon emission drivers of student conferences:

- **Venue Selection:** The location and energy efficiency of event spaces can play a big role. The commuting distance for attendees and the energy use of the venue itself both factor in.
- **Food Choices:** The ingredients on the menu matter. The production of animal-based proteins, particularly red meat, can be especially emission-intensive. Selecting vegetarian or vegan options can significantly reduce the overall footprint of the event menu
- **Travel:** Attendees' travel distance and mode (cars vs. bikes) heavily influence emissions.
- **Merch/Marketing:** Printed materials (flyers, programs) contribute to emissions. Reducing their usage or pivoting to digital options or eco-friendly alternatives can help.
- **Waste:** Food scraps and leftover materials in landfills generate harmful methane gas. Minimizing waste and proper recycling is key.

## Unveiling Sustainable Solutions

Based on our understanding of the problem, we've developed a set of actionable steps designed to incentivize and empower student event organizers to make their events more sustainable, all while being mindful of time constraints and budget limitations. These actions target the key emission drivers we identified within the event planning process. In total, there are eight of them, and each matches a specific intervention point as identified in Graph 1 above.

At the heart of our solution is the **Conference Sustainability Scorecard (CSS)** (see Appendix 1). This 10-question tool highlights budget-neutral actions that student event organizers can easily implement to improve sustainability. We recognize that the CSS isn't a silver bullet, but we hope it can generate momentum for the adoption of other emission reduction efforts in the future.

### **1. Team Formation: Assign sustainability responsibility to a conference co-president.**

- Assign one of the conference co-presidents or a designated organizing team member the responsibility to learn and complete the Conference Sustainability Scorecard (CSS) as well as monitor the implementation of CSS action items.

## **2. Kick-Off Meetings: Introduce Conference Sustainability Scorecard (CSS)**

- During the kick-off meeting with conference co-presidents, HBS Operations team provides the CSS to the team and clarifies the expectation to collect the CSS post-conference.

## **3. Number of Meal Forecast: Database Tracking Meals Ordered vs. Leftovers**

- RA already keeps track of the # of meals consumed at events. Improving the feedback loop between student organizers and RA staff will help improve accuracy in forecasting the number of meals to order.

## **4. RA Menu Selection: Update Default Menu with No-Beef, Low-Cost Options**

- In RA's student conference menu options, provide a set menu option with no beef. Ideally, this will be the option with the lowest price. Currently, RA provides a "Greening Your Conference" menu option which is about 30% more expensive than the lowest cost option.

## **5. Travel: Introduce Carbon-Offset Options on Eventbrite Page**

- Working with the HBS sustainability team, event organizers will promote a travel offset page on Eventbrite or other marketing materials/emails/WhatsApp, and highlight such options to event speakers and guests.

## **6. Merch: Charge \$1 for Physical Program on Eventbrite Page**

- Use digital agenda or on-site posters as default. Provide an option to purchase the physical program. This helps to further improve conference revenue.

## **7. Waste: Make Verbal Reminders for Compostable Waste**

- When HBS Restaurant Associates is the event caterer, notify conference attendees that all food-related waste (including utensils, napkins, and containers) is compostable. Give verbal reminders when directing attendees for lunch.

## **8. Review & Reflect: Collect Scorecard Data**

- Collect the CSS and keep track of progress year-over-year. This allows for continuous improvement in future events. Financial incentives can be provided when CSS is completed.

By implementing these actionable steps and working collaboratively, we can ensure that HBS student events are not only impactful but also environmentally responsible.

**Finally, a note of thanks** to our many collaborators across the Harvard ecosystem who helped with this project! Faculty members such as Prof. Mike Toffel, Harvard staff members including Jessica Fixsen, Leah Ricci, Elizabeth Kennedy, Alex Marashian, Hilary Noel, Courtney Forrester as well as the student organizers who provided their valuable time and input. Together, we’re excited to take the HBS community one step closer to a more sustainable future!

**Appendix 1: Conference Sustainability Scorecard (CSS)**

***Introduction:** the Conference Sustainability Scorecard (CSS) highlights the actions that student conference organizers can take to make their events more sustainable. The list is non-exhaustive but highlights a few easy-to-implement actions to improve event sustainability. The CSS is developed based on the existing student conference sustainability guides and stakeholder interviews.*

Process Indicators	Category	Yes	No
Did you receive this Scorecard from the HBS Conferences team when you started planning your event?	Admin		
Did you assign a Sustainability Lead on your conference leadership panel?	Admin		
Did you ask RA for data from prior years to provide a more accurate estimation of meals to order?	Dining		
Did you have visible signs or give a verbal reminder that all food-related waste (including utensils, napkins, containers) is compostable if provided by RA?	Waste		

Outcome Indicators	Category	Yes	No
Did you provide vegan dining options for meals? (Vegetarian offered by default from RA)	Dining		
Did you eliminate beef and other high-carbon-emitting protein sources from your menu?	Dining		
Did you utilize compostable or reusable cutlery for any off-campus events? (Skip if event is only on-campus, where compostable is used by default)	Dining		
Did you provide the option for speakers and attendees to purchase carbon offsets for conference-related travel (if applicable) leveraging c/naught portfolio?  <i>(est. ~\$1 for NYC --&gt; BOS, subject to change)</i>	Travel		
Did you avoid using a physical program or if you had a physical program, did you ask attendees to make a \$1 opt-in payment to receive the program?	Merch		
Did the conference team ensure recycling and compost bins were placed at reasonably accessible spots at all locations?	Waste		
2 free form questions:			
1. Did you undertake any other sustainability initiatives for your conference that you'd like to highlight?			
2. Are there any questions we should include in future versions of this questionnaire?			

Any questions? Email [sustainability@hbs.edu](mailto:sustainability@hbs.edu)