

Greening Your Department Events

Making greener, more sustainable choices for your event is much simpler than you may think. You can start small, with just one or two greener choices, and then experiment with others as you receive feedback and gain confidence. Sometimes people worry that green choices will raise the budget, but the opposite can also be true.

Event Planning

The fundamentals of sustainable event planning are to minimize the use of resources by, for example, reducing the use of paper and/or providing food and drinks that are locally produced and, if possible, also organic. Most people now agree that local products contribute less pollution to our environment than do organic products that must travel long distances. Obtaining products locally means that food selections will be more influenced by the seasons.

Invitations

If it is possible to invite guests via email, you will save both postage and paper. The email itself can carry the event details or it can carry the url of the web-based invitation, which permits full design latitude. Responses can similarly be by email.

If you do use paper invitations, ask your printer about recycled paper options, especially those with high post-consumer waste content, and about vegetable-based inks. For a small event, you might consider receiving RSVPs by telephone call rather than via response card.

Food & Beverage

Talk with potential caterers about your interest in including local products and what will be in season at the time of your event. You might consider cheeses from Wisconsin, fruits and vegetables from the Green City Market, beer from one of the local micro-breweries, and wine from an Illinois or Michigan vineyard that suits your guests' taste.

At buffets, on table menus, and on trays with passed hors d'oeuvres, note when food is local and/or organic. Consult with the Shedd Aquarium's listing of seafood that is fished or farmed in environmentally friendly ways.

http://www.sheddaquarium.org/pdf/cons_rightbite_seafood_card.pdf. Consider offering more vegetarian items or serving an all-vegetarian menu, both of which will reduce your costs and tread more lightly on the earth. Ask your caterer to inform the servers about these features of your food and beverage so that they can answer guests' questions and share information if asked. This helps spread the word.

Tableware

Using linens rather than paper tablecloths and napkins is considered more sustainable and is one way to green your event. Real china plates, glass glassware, and metal tableware instead of disposables are better for the environment. It is often more cost-effective to rent these through your caterer. These days, most caterers charge, sometimes a hefty fee, for disposables.

If you do use disposables, it is best to avoid Styrofoam and to choose biodegradable products such as bamboo or products made from recycled materials such as napkins with post-consumer waste content. Some caterers are able to provide biodegradable plates, cups, and utensils; ask about these, which usually cost no more than the non-biodegradable alternatives.

Floral

A simple and often inexpensive way to green your event is not to choose standard flowers, which are often heavily laden with pesticides and shipped from far away. A live plant or potted herb decorated with a pretty ribbon, a few attractive candles (beeswax is ideal), or a vase of colorful fruit (for example, lemons and limes or even lemons and pomegranates) make excellent centerpieces when local flowers are not available. Consult with your florist, caterer, or event planner. If you have multiple events in quick succession, you may be able to reuse your flowers in their entirety or just "freshen" them up with a couple of substitutions.

Recycling

Although there are recycling bins on campus, you may need a few extra ones on hand for your event. Contact Facilities Services at 4.1414 to request additional containers, and speak with your caterer about separating the recyclables from the trash. The University recycles glass, aluminum cans, aluminum takeout containers (if they are washed first), plastics 1 and 2, and clean paper.

Composting

Ask your caterer if the company composts and tell them that you are interested in it. Most do not, but client concerns and requests will encourage them to move in this direction.