**Recommendations for Enhancing Collaboration and Communication between Sustainability-related Groups at the University of British Columbia**

For

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# Abstract

# Introduction

## Background

As one of the world's most sustainable universities, UBC is home to over 35 sustainability student associations and clubs. Each of these groups fills a niche in areas ranging from climate actions, recycling, conservation, sustainable food system, social justice, or more. The great diversity of groups allows students to explore the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainability from different perspectives and varying levels of impacts (i.e. individual, organizational, societal).

To raise students' awareness of sustainable issues, an array of events are put on by groups throughout the school year. These events are intended to provide a platform for students to gain new knowledge in sustainability and build a social network with like-minded peers. Given a large number of groups, however, events often overlap with each other, both temporally and spatially. This problem mainly stems from the lack of communication mechanisms available for groups to interact during the event planning stage.

In this report, sustainability groups refer to student-led organizations at the University of British Columbia (UBC) dedicated to promoting one or more pillars of sustainability. The classification of sustainability groups is based solely on the list of student groups on the UBC Sustainability Initiative (USI) "Get Involved" webpage (Appendix A). The results of this report would, therefore, align with the mandate of the USI.

## Description of the event conflict problem

Events with a similar focus in sustainability can conflict with one another in terms of timing (having two or more happenings in a week), location (having two or more happenings in close vicinity at the same time), or both. The unplanned and undesirable concurrence of events has been a concern for many student organizers. A particular example of this problem is the clustering of job fairs, career nights, and professional networking events for students with an environmental background before reading breaks.

The implications of this problem are three-fold. First, competitions over the same group of participants reduce the turnout at each event; second, the diversion of resources over multiple events limits the capacity of each group; third, a plethora of similar messaging in event promotions may confuse participants.

## Purpose and Significance

Based on a review of publications on event planning as well as surveys with committee members of sustainability groups, this report assesses the most effective way of enhancing collaboration and communication between sustainability groups in the context of event planning.

The USI was established in 2010 to facilitate the university's effort to integrate operational and academic sustainability. One of USI's priorities is to enhance sustainability themes into student engagement activities through partnership with campus groups. To achieve this priority, USI offers consulting services to groups to help them plan sustainable events and created the Sustainability Student Council that comprises of representatives from most sustainability groups. The recommendations from this investigation would be valuable to USI in furthering their engagement with these groups and promoting sustainability through student-led events.

## Methodology

Six out of twenty sustainability groups responded to a short survey designed to gather data on the process of event planning and provide suggestions for increasing inter-group collaboration (Appendix B). An analysis of the benefits of collaboration was performed to determine the cost and time-effectiveness of three proposed solutions to the scheduling conflict problem.

In addition, secondary research was conducted to examine the problem of a scheduling conflict by exploring 35 groups' calendar on social media; the 35 groups are listed on the USI webpage. Publications on group collaboration for event planning were consulted to investigate the best practices of multi-group collaboration. The surveys and research were administered in November 2019.

## Limitations of the Study

The sample size was limited because some groups were unable to respond to the survey within the report timeline. Due to the small sample size, primary data analysis was corroborated using secondary sources to provide accurate conclusions.

Additionally, an interview with Kshamta Hunter, Manager of Sustainability Student Engagement, was unable to occur due to last-minute scheduling conflicts. However, additional secondary research on tools for better event planning was conducted to compensate for the absence of interview data. Interview questions are included in Appendix C for reference.

## Scope of the Inquiry

Six areas of inquires were examined to develop a recommendation for an easy-to-implement and feasible solution to the scheduling conflict problem:

* What are the challenges groups face in terms of event planning?
* Have groups ever collaboratively put on events? If yes, how do they find the collaborative experiences?
* How often do groups run into the problem mentioned above?
* When that happens, what is the general approach to solving it?
* What methods have groups tried to avoid the problem, if any? Are they successful or not?
* What could be the challenges of implementing the solution?

## Conclusions of the Inquiry

The report concludes by acknowledging the disconnected nature of sustainability-related events and by recommending immediate and practical measures to ensure resources are being allocated efficiently.

# Data Section

A survey was sent to 20 sustainability groups on campus, all of which are listed on USI "Get Involved" webpage (Appendix A). 6 groups responded, including the Environmental Law Group, Sprouts, UBCC350, Forestry Undergraduate Society, Students for Mining Justice, and Common Energy. The respondents range from the President of the group, to the Vice President Media, Co-Coordinator, Treasurer, Assistant Director, and Communication Coordinator.

## Existing challenges faced by groups in terms of event planning

This area of inquiry is to investigate the major hurdles sustainability groups struggle to overcome and to set the stage for understanding the importance and necessity of this research. Of the six groups, 100% of them host events in an academic year. Students for Mining Justice has organized 3 events according to their Facebook event page; Forestry Undergraduate Society and Environmental Law Group planned 4 to 5 events each; UBCC350 did 8 to 9 events and public actions; whereas Sprouts and Common Energy are on the higher end with 10 or more events or activities a year (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Number of events planned per year**

When asked to identify three greatest challenges they face with event planning, all respondents chose the “lack of communication with other groups” (100%). Time limitation and low attendance rate ranked second with 75%. It is followed by challenges imposed by unpredictable weather and limited resource (16.7%). Sprouts identified an additional difficulty, which is time commitment to cafe operation, that makes organizing events burdensome. Common Energy found that outreach and communication with external organizations as well as marketing among the most restrictive factors for the group’s event planning.

100%

66.7%

66.7%

16.7%

33.3%

16.7%

**Figure 2. Top 3 challenges in event planning**

## Frequency and prevalence of Scheduling Conflicts

67% of respondents have experienced scheduling conflicts with other sustainability groups, either temporally or spatially. Three groups indicated that lowered attendance is the primary drawback of this problem.

A secondary analysis on 35 groups’ event schedule on Facebook confirms the survey result (Table 1). In week November 11 to November 15, there were a total 8 events happening in the evenings, averaging 1.6 events per day. For students who are interested in more than one of these topics, they may find it hard to set apart time and energy to attend different events in a week. Some of these events occurred at the same time or back-to-back from each other, making multiple participation impossible. The average attendance of these event was 20 people, which is significantly lower than weeks with fewer events of the same kind.

**Figure 3: Groups’ experience with scheduling conflicts with another sustainability group**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Monday, Nov 11 | Tuesday, Nov 12 | Wednesday, Nov 13 | Thursday, Nov 14 | Friday, Nov 15 |
|  | **UBCC350**  5:30 PM  Teach-in: Divestment 101  **Students for Mining Justice**  6:30 PM  Mining Justice ArtBuild | **UBC Climate Hub, UBCC350, Social Justice Center**  5:00 PM  Film Screening & Fundraiser: Invasion  **Common Energy**  6:00 PM  Zero Waste Starter Kit Workshop  **Global Lounge**  6:00 PM  A Conversation About Belonging | **Student Environmental Center**  5:30 PM  Remode: A Sustainable Fashion Conference | **Geography Student Association**  4:30 PM  Grad School Info Night  **Environmental Law Group**  5:30 PM  2019 Environmental Negotiation Competition |

**Table 1: Event schedule of week November 11 - 15**

In response to the conflict, groups indicated that they had deployed a range of measures to address this problem. These measures include (a) asking peers from other groups about their event schedule; (b) reaching out to group separately to seek their support or present cooperation opportunity; (c) following other groups on social media in order to receive notification of their upcoming event; and (d) keeping an eye out for event updates in the sustainability newsletter send out monthly by the USI. As shown by the responses, groups are eager to gain access to each other's schedules through multiple avenues in their event planning process. However, sourcing for that information from groups separately could be time-consuming and incomplete. A solution to this problem should, therefore, able to provide a centralized and transparent way of obtaining event schedules from all sustainability groups.

## Benefit of inter-club collaboration

In spite of the challenge of communicating with other groups as identified in Figure 2, all of the six groups have organized events with another student group(s) collaboratively during this academic year (Figure 4). Respondents indicated that their choices of event partners had been predominately clubs within the sustainability community. Social Justice Center (SJC) is among the most active organizer and supporters of sustainability events; it has worked with 80% of the participating groups. Being an Alma Mater Society Resource Group, SJC might have more capacity in terms of funding, venue, recruitment and promotion to offer assistance to other groups. Sustainability groups also occasionally branch out to partners that are considered to be outside of the realm of sustainability. For example, Sprouts collaborated with Enactus UBC, an entrepreneurial and business-focused organization, on their weekly by-donation lunch.

**Figure 4: Collaboration with other groups in event planning**

Survey results show that sustainability groups have positive attitudes towards collaboration in the context of event planning, and indicated that co-organization of events had had positive impacts on them (Figure 5). 67% of respondents agree that collaboration allows for a higher attendance rate due to joint advertisement to a broader membership base and provide excellent opportunities for cross-skilling and knowledge sharing. 33% of the groups find that forming a partnership with other groups empowers them to gain stronger momentum to achieve the goals of their events. 16.7% of the groups believed that the collaboration process stimulated innovative ideas and offer new directions for future events, as well as enhancing time-efficiency as the workload is spread amongst an expanded team.

**Figure 5: Top 3 benefits of inter-group collaboration**

## Methods for enhancing collaboration and communication

Summarizing publications on inter-organizational event management, as well as survey results from student groups, a selection framework was developed to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of three proposed solutions (Ziakas 141). The preferred solution must have the following characteristics, which were considered as criteria in the selection, to support successful collaboration:

* Low time commitment for student groups
* Low time commitment for USI
* Inexpensive
* flexible
* Transparent exchange of information
* Accessible and technologically feasible
* can be used in the long run

Three options were investigated and considered against the framework.

### ****a) Option 1: Event Sharing roundtable during the Sustainability Student Council meeting****

Face-to-face interaction is the most straight-forward and traditional way groups have collaborated. Over the past 5 years, USI has played a tremendous role in facilitating in-person meetings for about 20 sustainability groups by hosting the Sustainability Student Council (SSC). The council comprises representatives from sustainability-related student groups and provides an opportunity for groups to provide feedback on projects, programs, and initiatives from UBC Sustainability Initiative, Campus + Community Planning Department, and UBC Wellbeing. Apart from being a bridge between the university and student groups, the SSC can also be leveraged as a platform where groups exchange ideas and share expertise in event planning. A “community update” roundtable session can be added to the Agenda of the SSC meeting for groups to inform others of their events and consolidate potential partners. As the facilitator of the meetings, USI staff are knowledgeable about sustainability happenings and resources on campus, and can offer assistance themselves. They can provide the necessary and immediate support or direct students in the right direction.

 A drawback of this solution is that it can be time-consuming for group representatives to schedule, travel to, and attend a meeting physically. The one representative per group may not possess the knowledge required to speak to the event planning process, which could lead to an unfruitful use of time for community updates. Furthermore, delay in information sharing and may occur because meetings only take place at a specific time and date.

### ****b) Option 2: Online communication tool****

Electronic collaboration (e-collaboration) increasingly defines how event management is carried out nowadays. E-collaboration is defined as cooperation among individuals or communities engaged in a common task using electronic technologies — such as collaborative writing tools and web conferencing systems (Kock 1). E-collaboration enables planners to organize people and other resources efficiently without the constraint of time and space (Lee 210). Unlike in-person meeting, groups would not need to commit to an appointment nor wait for a biweekly meeting to share information.

Currently, the USI hosts a Facebook group called Sustainability Student Network that caters to students from all walks of life interested in practicing sustainability. Building from the experience in managing a social media platform and communication tool, USI can initiate a private group to facilitate conversations amongst committee members of sustainability groups.

It is important to note, however, that this may increase the administrative cost for the USI to monitor the conversations and ensure that groups are used appropriately for the purpose of event coordination.

### ****c) Option 3: Online event calendar****

Another potential solution is to create an evergreen online event calendar that compiles all sustainability happenings on campus (Lee 233). An open calendar enhances transparency, and in turn, facilitates cooperation and communication among groups. The calendar can separate into two components: private and public. The private calendar will only be viewable and editable by the committees of sustainability groups. Groups can input their tentative plans for events (i.e. when and where) to prevent other groups from organizing similar events around the same time or location. Alternatively, they can use it to identify groups that they can collaborate with if a similar event is in the process of planning already. USI staff can also add in other relevant events missed by groups. On the other hand, the public calendar will be a one-stop-shop for students looking for sustainability events. Students can schedule their time accordingly and find events that best align with their passions.

This solution is technologically feasible; it can be established using Google Calendar and be embedded into the existing USI web page. There is no time commitment associated with this solution as groups can have the flexibility to update the calendar whenever an idea arises; information tends to be up-to-date as a result. Groups would entirely drive the event calendar. The involvement of the USI would be required mostly at the calendar creation and promotion stage; maintenance of the calendar would minimal compared to the two other options.

**Table 2: Comparison of the three proposed solutions against the selection framework**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Criteria | SSC Roundtable | Online Communication Group | Online Event Calendar |
| Low time commitment for student groups |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| Low time commitment for USI |  |  | ✓ |
| Inexpensive | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| flexible |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| Transparent exchange of information |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| Accessible and technologically feasible | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| can be used in the long run | ✓ |  | ✓ |

# Conclusion

## Summary and interpretation of findings

All sustainability groups participated in the survey has co-organized events with other sustainability student groups and recognize the benefits of collaboration in the context of event planning. Every group attributed the lack of communication between groups as the top challenge when planning an event, and hence are in favour of enhancing communication to avoid similar inconvenience from occurring. Finding from this report indicate that around 80% of the participating group have experienced the problem of event overlapping this academic year.

## Recommendations

Being the primary administrative body at UBC responsible for sustainability development and implementation, USI is best positioned to carry out much-needed measures to foster a collaborative culture to sustainability student groups. Resourceful technical and financial support from the USI would be of tremendous help to groups as they put on events that align with the mandate of USI. To successfully alleviate the problem and implement the preferred solution, below are some step-by-step recommendations to acquire an event calendar:

* With reference to internal guidance, explore the possibility of administering an online calendar.
* Review and select appropriate technology.
* Establish a schedule for implementation and review to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the event calendar.
* Allocate resources and assign staff with experience liaising with student groups to monitor and update the calendar if needed.
* Notify student groups of the establishment and use of an online event calendar.
* Advertise the use of event calendar to the student via USI’s social media, email newsletter, and boothing sessions.

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