Guide to Virtual Events

Hugo Hua - Sustainability Integration Intern

July 2020

Contents

1 Why Have Virtual Events?

Travel, especially air travel, is one of the largest contributors to Williams' carbon emissions (See figure 1). If we are to reach our carbon reduction goals, reducing travel is a necessary step. With so many web-conference technologies today, planning and executing virtual events is easier than ever before!

Figure 1:
Williams College Greenhouse Emissions by Source [a]
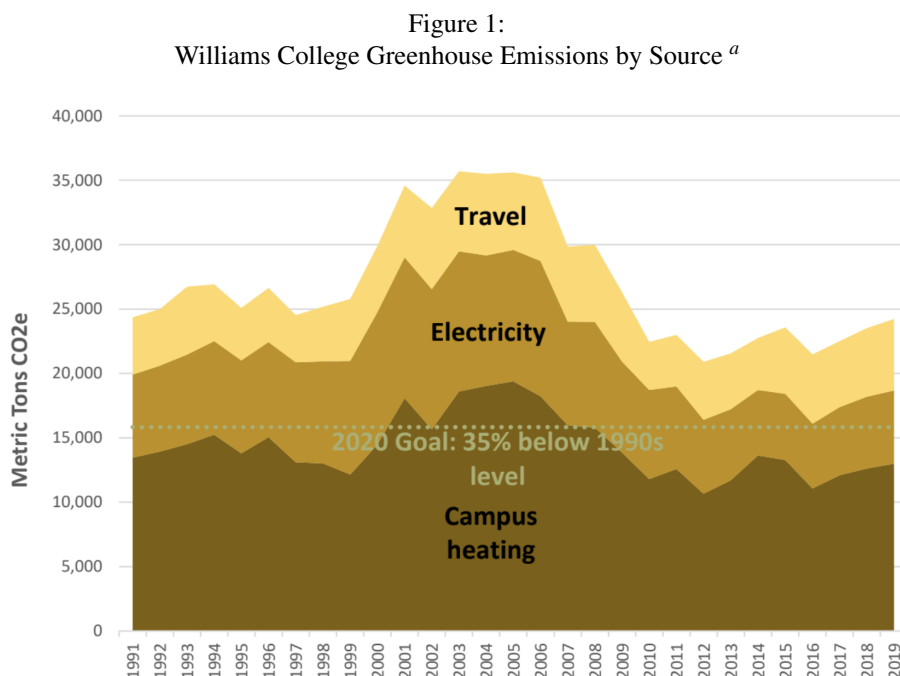
1.1 Types of Events

Some events are more suited to be conducted virtually than others, but any event could be done online with the right planning and some creativity. The best events to be done virtually are informational meetings, seminars, or lectures. In these cases, where there is less face-to-face interaction needed, the transition to virtual would be quite simple. On the other hand, events with a large social aspect, where participants are primarily present to network and share ideas in small groups, may be more challenging. But there are always strategies that can be used to enhance the experience, as will be discussed later on.
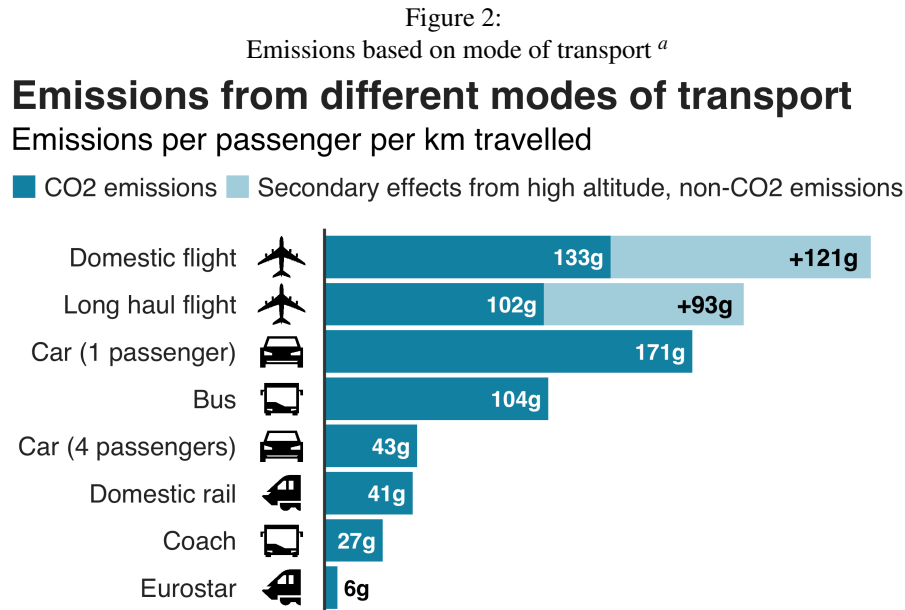
2 Benefits and Challenges

Here are some pros and cons of virtual events and how to create solutions to common problems.

2.1 Benefits

Below are some of the great benefits of switching to virtual events!

- Reduced Emissions (See figure 2)

Figure 2:
Emissions based on mode of transport [a]

Emissions from different modes of transport
Emissions per passenger per km travelled

■ CO2 emissions ■ Secondary effects from high altitude, non-CO2 emissions

Mode		
Domestic flight	133g	+121g
Long haul flight	102g	+93g
Car (1 passenger)	171g	
Bus	104g	
Car (4 passengers)	43g	
Domestic rail	41g	
Coach	27g	
Eurostar	6g	

Note: Car refers to average diesel car
Source: BEIS/Defra Greenhouse Gas Conversion Factors 2019   BBC

[a]From BBC: https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-49349566

Travel is a huge contributor to climate change. By switching to online events, we can reduce transportation of all kinds, especially air travel.

- Cost Reduction

Along with environmental benefits of reducing travel, costs can be greatly reduced using virtual events. It reduces the need to pay for venues, lodging, travel, food, and any other related costs. The extra money can be used to better compensate speakers, and allow for more high-profile speakers which will improve the content of the sessions.

- Larger Scale / Inclusivity

Making events virtual allows for greater participation. It becomes inclusive for those who were unable to travel to in-person events for whatever reason. In addition, there are no longer constraints as

to venue size or any associated costs. There is also the possibility of inviting guests or speakers who also would not have been able to appear in person, thus improving the content of the event. Virtual events can also be easily recorded for future use, and for those who were busy at the time.

2.2   Challenges

As expected, virtual events can come with a series of challenges. Here are some common issues and some ideas to alleviate them.

- Lack of Social Interaction

  A common complaint of virtual events is not having the opportunity to network and connect with others face-to-face. In many ways, meeting someone online does not feel the same as meeting in person. Here are some ideas to increase participation and foster an comfortable environment to get to know one another online!

  1. Set up breakout rooms without set topics, to give people an opportunity to talk freely
  2. Exchange contact information and encourage participants to reach out to one another
  3. Set up activities, such as online lunch dates, icebreakers, etc. Get creative!

- Technology Problems

  Technological issues can seem unavoidable when doing anything online, but there are steps that can be taken to lower risk and create a smooth experience.

  1. Most importantly, try and figure out technology logistics well ahead of time.
  2. Have staff from IT available and test everything before beginning.
  3. To limit problems on the side of participants, communicate early and often about how the event will be conducted, what software or internet capabilities are required, and how to log into the event.

3   Case Study

On May 19 - May 20, 2020, the '68 Center for Career Exploration held their annual Small College Career Alliance Conference, but for the first time, it was conducted virtually. Here are some reflections from their experience. Please use these ideas as a template for your next virtual event, if you find this helpful! Special thanks to Don Kjelleren and Emily Burr.

3.1   What Worked

- Environmentally friendly! Most years, faculty and staff travel to various schools across the region, costing huge amounts of emissions in the form of transportation.

- Much cheaper. The department was able to reduce costs by over 95% by eliminating the need for air travel and lodging.

- More inclusive. Last year, 87 people were able to attend the conference, but this year, over 200 attended the virtual version.

- Scalable. Since the conference had previously been conducted in person, there was an existing framework as to how to program the conference. Most aspects of the in-person version were successfully transferred to a virtual context. In addition, the virtual setting allowed for more speakers, including a welcome address from Maud!

3.2   What could be Improved

- Lack of networking. An important part of this conference in the past has been the social aspect and the networking between staff from different colleges. In the future, some ideas for this issue include having breakout "lunch date" groups to encourage conversation.

- Minor technology issues. Having someone from IT available next time would be helpful.

3.3   Technology and Organization

With such a large selection of online-conferencing programs available, figuring out the technological aspects can be daunting. In addition, organizing separate meetings and clearly communicating about what events are happening in which virtual room can be challenging as well. Here are some suggestions, modeled after the Career Center's conference.

3.3.1   Technology

Google Meet is a fantastic option, as it is free, has no limits for number of members, and most people already own a Google account.

1. Create google meet links for each individual meeting or lecture.

   Have a list of links, along with the phone number that allows for people to call into a meeting without using Google. This way, participants and presenters alike can simply click on the link of the meeting they wish to join.

2. Make sure participants have the proper set up to be able to join meetings.

   Google Meet requires a modern browser; most updated versions of popular browsers such a Chrome, Firefox, and Safari work perfectly, but older versions, as well as Internet Explorer, may experience difficulties.[1]

3.3.2   Organization

It's important to make sure that participants can find what they're looking for!

1. Have a detailed list of all the different virtual meetings, along with a description of what will be covered in each section.

   This way, participants can join the relevant call easily!

2. Create a simple registration form.

   Depending on what information is needed, using a simple google form could be useful in collecting names and contact information.

---

[1]https://support.google.com/meet/answer/7317473?hl=en

4   Final Thoughts

Virtual events will certainly take some getting used to, but if we, as a community, can move towards having as many events virtual as possible, and limiting in-person events to those that are deemed absolutely necessary, we can take a big step in reducing carbon emissions and reaching our sustainability goals!