From Surplus to Systems: Teaching Sustainable Event Management Through Food Rescue

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Why Food Rescue Belongs in Event Education

PURPOSE AND EDUCATIONAL NEED

- Food surplus reflects interconnected decisions about attendance, menus, service, timing, and dietary needs.
- Students need to understand food rescue as an operational system.
- This proposed teaching model connects sustainability with authentic event decision-making.

"How do we teach students to design the entire system before the event begins?' "



The Prevent–Recover–Redistribute Teaching Model

APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

1

PREVENT

Forecast attendance and consumption; adjust menus, quantities, and service.

2

RECOVER

Plan safe handling, packaging, storage, transportation, and contingencies.

3

REDISTRIBUTE

Match surplus with partner capacity, community needs, and dignified distribution.

Applied Learning: The Event Food Rescue Challenge

"Student teams develop and defend a feasible food-surplus plan using an event scenario and industry and nonprofit feedback."

Planning: Prevention strategy, forecasting plan, stakeholder map.

Operations: Recovery workflow, safety protocol, contract language.

Evaluation: Impact dashboard, revised plan, reflection.

What Students Learn—and How Faculty Can Use It

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

- Analyze the causes and consequences of surplus.
- Integrate forecasting, safety, logistics, partnerships, and measurement.
- Balance environmental, economic, and social priorities.
- Assess through a team plan, feasibility rubric, revision memo, and individual reflection.

Implications for Event Education

- Adapt as a multiweek module, client project, or case competition.
- Use simulations when access to event data or partners is limited.
- Bring industry and community perspectives into student decision-making.
- Prepare students to navigate ambiguity and operational tradeoffs.

"The educational value extends beyond the pounds of food diverted. It lies in preparing students to connect decisions, coordinate stakeholders, and balance hospitality, cost, safety, dignity, and environmental responsibility."

Kolb (1984); Elkington (1997); Wiek et al. (2011).

Original White Paper & References: christinecleaverportfolio.com/white-papers

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Abstract

Purpose and Educational Need

Food surplus is a visible sustainability challenge at meetings, exhibitions, and large-scale events, yet students often encounter it only as an environmental statistic rather than as an operational system. Surplus emerges through interconnected decisions about attendance, guarantees, menus, service styles, dietary accommodation, program timing, weather, and changing consumption patterns. Growing GLP-1 use may further complicate forecasting as historical assumptions about per-person consumption become less reliable. Professionals must therefore anticipate uncertainty, coordinate stakeholders, protect food safety, and plan recovery before an event begins. This paper proposes an industry-engaged instructional model that positions food rescue as a complex event-design problem through which students develop sustainability, operations, collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making competencies.

Conceptual Foundation

The model combines experiential learning, systems thinking, and the triple bottom line. Experiential learning moves students through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Systems thinking reveals that purchasing, production, contracts, refrigeration, transportation, nonprofit capacity, and community impact are interdependent. The triple bottom line expands evaluation beyond diversion totals to environmental stewardship, economic feasibility, and social value (Elkington, 1997). Together, these perspectives support an authentic challenge in which students test assumptions with practitioners, design a feasible response, and revise it using feedback.

The Prevent–Recover–Redistribute Teaching Model

The model organizes learning around three connected stages. In the prevent stage, students compare registration with attendance, assess consumption data, evaluate menu variety and service formats, and identify how conservative guarantees or excess specialty meals generate waste. Teams create a forecasting and measurement plan combining data with operational judgment. They also consider how

emerging behaviors, including reduced appetite associated with GLP-1 use, may require event practice to catch up with attendee reality without making assumptions about individual guests.

In the recover stage, students map unavoidable edible surplus from the final meal period through cooling, packaging, labeling, storage, loading, transportation, and receipt. They consult culinary, venue, planning, and food-recovery stakeholders and define responsibilities and contingencies. A promise to donate does not resolve constraints involving labor, food safety, refrigeration, access, recipient hours, or last-minute changes.

In the redistribute stage, students identify partners capable of accepting food safely, promptly, and with dignity. They assess capacity, cultural appropriateness, proximity, equity, and fit with community needs. Redistribution becomes one component of a strategy that prioritizes prevention while ensuring unavoidable surplus creates social value.

Applied Learning Experience

The Event Food Rescue Challenge gives teams a scenario with attendance projections, menus, dietary requests, venue restrictions, timelines, and potential partners. They produce a prevention strategy, forecasting plan, stakeholder map, reverse-logistics workflow, safety protocol, contract language, and impact dashboard. Cases—including total-food-utilization practices, large-event programs, and Musically Fed partnerships—provide comparative evidence. Teams present to industry and nonprofit professionals, then submit a revised plan and reflection explaining how feedback changed their decisions.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Students should be able to: (1) analyze the operational, environmental, economic, and social causes of surplus; (2) design a plan incorporating forecasting, safety, logistics, partnerships, and measurement; (3) collaborate with industry and community stakeholders; (4) evaluate decisions through systems-thinking and triple-bottom-line principles; and (5) communicate professional recommendations. A rubric assesses evidence, integration, feasibility, equity, measurement, and communication. A revision memo and individual reflection reveal learning the team product may obscure.

Implications for Meeting and Event Education

The model can function as a multiweek module, semester client project, case competition, or interdisciplinary collaboration. Faculty can use a simulation when industry access is limited or deepen the work through venue data, practitioner interviews, and community-partner review. Students gain experience with ambiguity and cross-sector collaboration; partners receive fresh analysis and planning tools.

The model reframes food rescue from a charitable action after an event into a designed system beginning with prevention. Students balance hospitality, cost, safety, logistics, dignity, and environmental responsibility—the real tensions of practice. It advances IAEE's emphasis on collaboration, curriculum, and creativity by joining classroom learning with industry knowledge and community priorities. Faculty gain a usable framework for preparing professionals to nourish attendees, reduce waste, and extend food's value beyond the event.

References

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