



What's Our Flight Plan? Tackling Air Travel in Laurier's Climate Action

Workshop report from the WLUFAs Climate Action Committee

About the workshop

What's Our Flight Plan? was co-organized by the Office of Research Services, the Sustainability Office, and WLUFAs Climate Action Committee. The workshop was hosted simultaneously at Laurier Waterloo, Laurier Brantford, and virtually via Teams on October 9, 2024. There were roughly fifteen attendees in Waterloo and twelve online, but no in-person attendees in Brantford. Ten people participated in the breakout discussion in Waterloo, and six online. There was representation from faculty, the Library, staff, and the administration.

Speakers

The workshop opened with three presentations to give participants an overview of the issue and different perspectives on how it is being addressed and what more could be done.

Derek Hall

Academic Air Travel and Greenhouse Gas Emissions at Laurier: Dilemmas, Ethics, Action

The first presentation was by Derek Hall. Derek is Chair of the WLUFAs Climate Action Committee, but he presented only in his capacity as a faculty member (Political Science and the Balsillie School). His talk introduced the workshop's themes by presenting air travel as a dilemma for people who care about their carbon footprint and for institutions with emissions reduction and sustainability commitments like Laurier. Flying is important or essential for many core university goals, but is also a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Cutting back on flying can impose real costs (missed opportunities) on individual academics and universities, but continuing our current levels of flying undermines institutional and global climate goals and may reduce our credibility as advocates for climate action.

Derek began by introducing two aspects of Laurier air travel that aren't directly climate-related but that should be kept in mind throughout our discussions. First, access to air travel at Laurier is not distributed equally; for several reasons, some Laurier employees fly a great deal on university business, while many rarely or never do. Second, travel is increasingly expensive. At a time of serious financial pressure on Ontario universities, expenditure on airfare, hotels, ground transportation and meals may be competing with other priorities.

Derek then drew on his [recently-published paper](#) on air travel emissions reporting and policy at Canadian universities to argue that the issue needs to be taken seriously, even if it is difficult to

determine how significant university flight emissions are in absolute terms and as a percentage of overall institutional emissions¹The best ways to address air travel emissions, however, are not obvious.

Two main approaches to reducing air travel emissions have been adopted at the small number of Canadian universities that have addressed this issue so far. The first relies on persuasion by providing people with information about flying's impact on climate change, alternatives to air travel (like virtual meetings and trains), and ways to achieve the same goals while reducing flying (like bundling trips). The second encourages or directly supports 'offset' projects, which pay others to reduce their carbon emissions or to sequester carbon. Derek argued that these kinds of initiatives are unlikely to bring about significant reductions in flight emissions and suggested that real progress may require putting emissions-based restrictions on flying (though he didn't advocate that Laurier adopt such restrictions right now).

Derek then suggested that discussions about flying less should focus on which flights are more and less valuable. He posed four questions that should be relevant in weighing a flight's individual and institutional benefits against its climate costs:

- how far away is the destination?
- what's the purpose of the flight?
- who's doing the flying?
- how much has the flier already flown this year?

Derek concluded by reminding the meeting that this is not just an issue for faculty, noting that administrators, staff, and students also need to think carefully about their academic air travel.

Katarina Milicic

Laurier's Air Travel Emissions Calculation Process

The second speaker was Katarina Milicic of Laurier's Sustainability Office. She provided a brief presentation on Laurier's existing procedures for calculating air travel emissions, which included an orientation to the three different emissions scopes:

- Scope 1, direct emissions from our campus operations and vehicle fleet;
- Scope 2, indirect emissions from purchased energy, mainly electricity;
- Scope 3, indirect emissions from other purchased services—which is where air travel falls.

Katarina explained that the travel data for emissions calculations is gleaned from Chrome River expense reports, with the International Civil Aviation Organization emissions calculator used to

¹ Hall, D. (2024). Reporting of and policy on greenhouse gas emissions from air travel at Canadian universities. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-03-2023-0102>

translate distances flown into emissions. As this is not an automated process, it requires a significant investment of staff resources by the Sustainability Office.

Jonathan Newman

Air Travel and Laurier's Research Mission

The third speaker was Jonathan Newman, Laurier's VP: Research. Jonathan shared his reflections on the need to balance travel for fieldwork and collaboration—which can be crucial aspects of career development—with the imperative of addressing the climate impacts of air travel. He suggested that there is an opportunity to lead by example, by acknowledging the need to change behaviour and putting systems in place to support more sustainable choices. While recognizing the debates around offsets, he also posed the question of whether they might have a role to play in relation to travel that is deemed unavoidable.

Breakout discussion summaries

The following subsections offer loosely thematic summaries of the ideas that were shared in the two breakout discussions.

Technical aspects

- Currently, reporting of air travel emissions across the university sector (and elsewhere) is not based on consistent metrics. This makes comparisons between universities' baselines and reductions performance virtually impossible.
- For example, the ICAO calculator vs. IATA calculator: only the latter controls for aircraft type. Another example is whether calculators include the radiative forcing impacts of flights—most do not, and emissions-equivalent impacts are dramatically increased when they do.
- Laurier's existing procedure for tracking flight emissions is a manual process that is very time-intensive for Sustainability Office staff.
- Is there a role for offsets? If so, is there a way to integrate offsets into travel cost reimbursement?
- Is there a role for an internal "carbon tax", where instead of sending funds to external offset programs, we could use those funds on Laurier's own emissions reductions efforts?
- Could we track the carbon footprint of university (sub-) units and/or of individual research projects? Could we ask projects to develop a carbon budget for their research?
- Laurier-sanctioned student travel can be tracked through the Journey software system, since students need to include flight information there.

What counts as Laurier air travel?

- Canadian universities are not required to report their flight emissions, and reporting universities include different kinds of flights (for example, some report on student club travel and some don't). Because including more kinds of flights makes their emissions look higher, universities face a disincentive to expanding their reporting.

- In addition to faculty and staff travel for Laurier business, it makes sense to track student travel for Laurier-sanctioned programs.
- There might be a case for tracking the program start/finish carbon footprint for international students, based on their country of origin, but we should not be tracking their personal travel, flights home for family visits etc.
- Should we expand focus to other Laurier-related travel that is not by air?
- What about personal commuting decisions? Could we have greater impacts by focussing efforts there, even if those emissions don't "belong" to Laurier?

Assessing the value/impact of travel

- It is difficult to quantify the value of a conference or other travel. One-size-fits-all criteria are not meaningful or effective.
- Multiple factors, like EDI and career stage, need to be taken into account.
- What is the impact of individual decisions not to travel? What's one more empty seat on a plane? We need to think of this in the aggregate—both Laurier-wide and sector-wide. Are there any communications with other universities in Ontario about this, to take a more coordinated approach?
- Rather than pressures and prohibitions, we need to cultivate a *culture of exploration and reflection*. Doing so depends on *good information*.

Models

- The Balsillie school started two years ago to require a carbon budget and travel justification in applications for travel funding. Nobody's travel has been turned down yet, but in principle this is a possibility.
- Some universities in Quebec have started discussions towards a common approach to measuring air travel emissions.
- Some European universities are much further ahead on flight emissions reporting.

Leveraging existing practices

- Anecdotally, there has already been a reduction in flying for Laurier business, due both to budget cuts and virtual meeting technology. This change in mindset is a good place to start the discussion.
- COVID-19 taught us to do many more things remotely. More robust virtual conference hosting capability and support at Laurier would encourage more of this kind of activity to replace in-person speakers, workshops, conferences, etc.

Next steps

It is hoped that this brief workshop was only the first step in a longer discussion. The WLUFA Climate Action Committee will seek ongoing partnership with the Sustainability Office, the Office of Research Services, and other units at Laurier, to strike a working group on the topic.