

4 UWaterloo Canada Day: A case in risk management and stakeholder engagement

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Abstract

For over three decades, an annual Canada Day celebration was hosted by the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. A change in leadership for the event in 2013 transformed a grassroots, student-led event; a new strategic event design was introduced to include sponsorships, branding, and scale of the celebration. Subsequently, several escalating risks and costs were identified, and a feasibility review was conducted. This led to the University's decision to wind-down the event in 2019. The UWaterloo Canada Day case explores the importance of ongoing review of event feasibility, risk management and stakeholder engagement for event managers.

Subjects: Event planning and feasibility; stakeholder management; conflict resolution; risk management and legal issues; best practices of event organisations

Introduction

In the community of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, a Canada Day celebration was held each July 1 for close to 35 years. UWaterloo Canada Day was a free, day-long event open to all residents of the community, and included live music and entertainment, food trucks, children's activities, and a vibrant fire-work display at the end of the evening. It was held on Columbia Lake Field, a large, open field on the University of Waterloo's north campus, situated in the city of Waterloo. Over three decades, the UWaterloo Canada Day event evolved from a grassroots gathering to a highly produced concert and cultural celebration. At its peak, over 65,000 people were estimated to attend the celebrations.

The following case will describe: (a) the evolution of the event; (b) a description of the event components; (c) the key event stakeholders; (d) the results of an administrative review of the event; and (e) the eventual wind-down of the event. Photographs, an event budget, and communication and promotional materials are shared as supporting evidence.

The Case: UWaterloo Canada Day

What is Canada Day?

Canada's national holiday is celebrated each year on July 1. Since 1868, Canadians have shown their pride in their country's history, culture and achievements at festivities held in communities across the country (Government of Canada, 2022). Canada Day celebrations might include parades, pageants, citizenship ceremonies, music, food, and fireworks displays. Celebrations are held in large cities, small towns, and hosted within individual neighbourhoods. Activities are typically family-friendly and inclusive of all ages and cultural backgrounds, recognising the cultural diversity of the country.

A community celebration

The University of Waterloo is home to over 42,000 students, and is a major employer in the community, with close to 4,000 faculty and staff (University of Waterloo, 2022). Its primary campus is in the City of Waterloo, one of three cities encompassed within the Region of Waterloo, a regional municipality. The Region of Waterloo has a reputation for technology and innovation, driven largely by its post-secondary sector. Waterloo is located 92 kilometres from Toronto, Canada's most metropolitan urban centre. Table 4.1 outlines the population of the attendee catchment area.

Total Region of Waterloo population	575,847
City of Waterloo population	121,436

Table 4.1: Population of the attendee geographic area (Statistics Canada, 2021)

Evolution of the event

UWaterloo Canada Day, from its origin to dissolution, takes place over a 35-year period. The event originated from the University of Waterloo's student association, the Federation of Students, in 1984 and was intended to connect students with their local community. The event was run entirely by students and included low-budget programming such as a parade, children's face-painting, and student "Battle of the Bands," and a fireworks display. As the event grew in popularity, the students began to identify that they did not have the human and financial resources to continue to deliver the event. In 2013, the Federation of Students signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Waterloo, and the University assumed leadership for the planning and execution of the event. Following the change in leadership, UWaterloo Canada Day was presented as "hosted by the University of Waterloo in partnership with its Federation of Students." The Federation of Students assisted with promotion, student volunteer recruitment, and the student union president would speak at the event.