

From Awareness to Action: Outreach for Western's Sustainability Action Plan

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Executive Summary:

As defined by Kate Beck, having the Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) Implementation Manager be a position filled by one individual, it can be hard to take the time to research what forms of communication students would be most receptive to, and how to begin engaging with students that are interested in sustainability, but who are not explicitly studying it. However, being transparent and engaging with students is a value that the Sustainability Engagement Institute (SEI) holds close; therefore Kate Beck is looking to better understand how best to communicate and engage with this student audience about Western Washington University's (WWU) SAP, as well as their sustainability goals and progress. Additionally this information would support WWU's work on advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs); especially goal 4: Quality Education, goal 13: Climate Action, and goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. In order to work towards the UNSDGs we must make steps to advance them at a local level. Our institution of WWU is the perfect place to begin this work.

This project and report is a culmination of research using both primary and secondary sources to try and gain a better understanding of what strategies of engagement have been successful on other campuses and on our own, and what will be the most successful moving forward. In order to get a wide and nuanced understanding of this topic we conducted a survey on campus, inventoried other institutions, interviewed key informants at other institutions, and held a focus group of sustainability leaders at WWU. The overall themes that emerged through this research, and that informed our recommendations were:

1. Ensuring information overload is not a barrier to accessibility.
2. Information should be easily accessible, and the flow of additional information should be intuitive.
3. In-person engagement that centers students is key to long-term progress of increasing student engagement.
4. Bringing information to students will engage a much wider audience.

Based on these results we developed four recommendations:

1. Use Instagram as a highlight reel, and include links to the Sustainability Engagement Institute (SEI) website in a linktree in the bio. Additionally, lean on student workers and recent graduates for social media content or consult with student workers to ensure relevance.
2. Continue writing newsletters, but archive them all on the SEI website, and contact other campus newsletters and magazines to feature snippets from already written newsletters.
3. Increase collaboration with the student ambassador position and utilize this position as a strong partner in student engagement events and activities.
4. Connect with the curriculum committee and relevant professors to discuss integrating curriculum about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and Western's Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) into entry level classes across colleges.

Introduction:

The oceans are becoming more acidic, garbage islands are becoming commonplace, temperatures are rising, and sea levels are increasing. The climate crisis will require every individual and every institution to make serious changes in how they operate, and those changes need to happen now. Earth doesn't have time to spare. Although sustainability progress is being made, a lot goes on behind the scene and ends up going unnoticed by citizens—which can create a discrepancy of progress and accountability. According to the United Nations Development Programme People's Climate Vote, four out of five people believe their governments should be doing more to combat climate change (UNDP, 2024). This demand for action is reflected by Western Washington University students demanding transparency of the university's climate progress. Although WWU has a comprehensive Sustainability Action Plan outlining the sustainability progress and goals of the university, not many people are aware of this lengthy and dense document, and even fewer people understand it clearly.

The Sustainability Engagement Institute has been trying to make the sharing of campus sustainability progress more accessible and digestible, but since it is still a new endeavor, they are not sure the most effective way to share those highlights. Currently, they are sharing this information through Instagram posts, monthly newsletters, webinars, and a sustainability dashboard. All of these methods combined are quite a bit of work, and we want to find a more efficient way to get the information out there. Our goal through this project is to provide the SEI a recommendation for which methods of communication, both existing and new, are the most effective way to spread this information, and bring the sustainability conversation to the average student.

Other institutions try to achieve this in a number of ways. One example strategy that stood out to us was the use of student sustainability ambassadors to communicate and engage with other students. By bringing the sustainability conversation to students, who often are just leaving their parents house for the first time, we can set these students up for success and create good sustainability habits.

Another example strategy we found in our research was to include more sustainability information in the general university curriculum. Whether this looks like new classes on sustainability within each college, or sustainability integration into existing class syllabi, this is another relatively simple way to bring sustainability knowledge to students in a way that they find engaging.

Increasing navigability of information on sustainability dashboards is another way other institutions have found effective. Although this only helps students who are actively seeking out

the information, it's still a good practice to make sure those who want to hear about sustainability progress and updates can reasonably find it.

In tandem with this, contextualizing much of the information on the dashboard within the SAP and UNSDGs is also important and effective. The UNSDGs are a universal way to talk about sustainability progress. Putting university sustainability updates in this context can create a common understanding and help students transfer this information and apply it to other things in context of the UNSDGs.

In an effort to source new ideas of circulating information about sustainability, we looked at 3 separate institutions and one of their unique solutions to the transparency problem. First, we looked at Colorado State University. CSU's Eco Leaders program is a peer mentoring program focused specifically on sustainability and environmental education. These Eco Leaders live in the dorms similar to an RA, but their goal is to increase environmental issue awareness amongst the people who live in the dorms. They make infographic posters, are responsible for 5 hours of sustainability engagement a week (not specified how), and take Eco Leader classes relating to sustainability. For their spring semester, they each did independent projects, culminating in a fridge rental program, increased bike storage, composting bins, a community closet, and more.

This program takes sustainability and brings it to the students, regardless of their major. Most people who live in the dorms are freshmen, just moving out of their parents house, and building new habits. By implementing the Eco Leaders programs, they can help these students create sustainable habits, learn about how to help the environment, and maybe even help them realize they want to major in the environmental field.

While this would take higher-up administrative approval and funding, this would be a great opportunity for Western to bring sustainability education to the students. The Eco Leaders could take the highlights from the sustainability action plan, and teach it to the students, make infographics, etc. It is our understanding that Western used to have a similar program funded by Residence Life, and organized by the Sustainability Engagement Institute, so we know that there is a place for it on our campus.

This concept is obviously a much bigger scale than our group can do in this class, but could be something that our university strives to achieve in the future. This is a problem that universities and institutions all over the country have been facing. Our project could be a stepping stone in this larger long-term process of making sustainability more accessible and bringing the concepts to the students instead of making them come to us.

Methodology:

We started our data collection with a survey, to get a general idea of what students wanted. Then we convened a focus group to get more in-depth and specific student answers and our survey

results helped guide our focus group questions. Then we interviewed sustainability staff at other institutions so that we could compare what we are doing to what other schools are doing. The data from the focus groups and survey informed our interviews with the other schools and what things to look for in the institution inventory. Our project has many stakeholders and opportunities to expand, so getting comprehensive and multifaceted data, both quantitatively and qualitatively, was valuable—particularly for reaching student voices, we wanted to provide multiple opportunities for students to share their feedback in the form of surveys or focus groups.

By using several different data collection methods, we see the information from several different angles. The survey data gave us an overview of what students want, focus groups gave us a smaller pool, but a deeper knowledge of what those students want to see from the SAP, and the interviews with other institutions and inventories on their programs will help us compare what we are doing with those institutions and help us learn about how we could implement what we learned the students want to see.

Survey:

We started developing the survey by coming up with ideas of what we wanted to get out of the survey, what information we wanted to gather. We wanted to know if students had heard of the SAP, how they'd heard about it, and how they learn about other university news. We also needed a demographic question for context, and we didn't want to make the survey too long that students would get bored. We wanted to keep the survey between 3-5 questions.

To get the survey out to students, we posted the link on various social media outlets we have access to, as well as posted flyers with QR codes on department bulletin boards, and at bus stops (Appendix D). Our social media plan was to stagger our Instagram Story posts across a two week period in order to maximize exposure without oversaturating peoples' Instagram feeds if they follow multiple accounts that posted our link. We got the Instagram accounts for Students for Climate Action and the Sustainability Engagement Institute, as well as our personal Instagram accounts, to post the link on their stories. This way we could get students while they are already on their phones, and we could also catch a wide variety of students, not just our friends and classmates. The link was sent out from some of our classmates directly to friends as well. We also put about 20 flyers with a QR code to the survey all around campus (Appendix D).

Surveys were posted in most buildings around campus. Including two at the Haggard Hall bus stop, on the main VU messenger board, by the on-campus Post Office, in the Miller Market, in the Fine Arts building, two in the Ross Engineering building, by the UEPP office in Arntzen, by the main entrance of Environmental Studies, in the Women's bathroom in the basement of Environmental Studies, in the Computer Science lab hallway in the Communications Facility, on the Interdisciplinary science building's bulletin, on the Biology building's first floor hallway bulletin, the Morse hall bulletin, the Smate bulletin wall, in Fraser hall, and on a bulletin board in

Old Main. The goal was to find places where people are sitting on their phones waiting for classes to start, etc. This way, they scan the QR code and can fill out the survey while they are waiting.

The goal was to reach as many different majors as possible to try to get a comprehensive understanding of how students want to receive SAP updates. We took the preliminary survey results and used them to inform our questions for the focus group. Since not many people knew about the SAP, we knew we had to tailor our questions to a broader sustainability, rather than specifics of the plan. We also wanted to avoid placing judgment on survey-takers for not knowing about the SAP, we just wanted their honest feedback.

Our survey consisted of five questions, four that were related to the SAP, and one that asked students what college their studies fell under. These questions were meant to gather data on existing engagement with the SAP, as well as future engagement with the SAP. Over the course of 1 month we received 50 responses. We received responses from every college at Western, though some were more heavily represented than others. There were 18 answers for the College of the Environment, 11 from Science and Engineering, seven from Fairhaven, seven from Humanities, six from Fine and Performing Arts, four from Business, three undeclared, two graduate students, and one from Woodring. Please note that excluding the first question, students were allowed to pick more than one answer. For the demographic question, some students are enrolled in interdisciplinary majors so more than one college may apply.

Inventory:

Our inventory of other institutions (Appendix C) included ten categories, and looked at seven institutions, three of which are reach institutions, and four of which are peer institutions.

Our reach institutions were:

University of Washington

Michigan Institute of Technology

Colorado State University

We chose these reach institutions due to their known leadership in the realm of sustainability, the plethora of sustainability initiatives they promoted, and the creativity and uniqueness of their sustainability engagement strategies. We identified these indicators during a preliminary round of research into existing strategies for communication about sustainability. In this search we were looking for schools with a large number of forms of communication, an existing stereotype as a school known to be a leader in sustainability, and schools that had unique approaches to engaging their students in sustainability work.

Our peer institutions were:

University of Wisconsin—Madison
 Humboldt State University (University of California)
 Eastern Illinois University
 University of Puget Sound

We randomly chose these institutions from the official peer institution list located on Western Washington's website. We chose to do four based on our time limitations, but would have found the addition of more institutions into the data set helpful if we had more time.

The categories we chose attempted to gather both demographic information, and information related to their sustainability communication styles. We chose to include some demographic information in order to help us understand what factors may make their communication styles work well for them, and help us to understand how feasible adapting that strategy to Western is. We found the information relevant to our inventory by reading through any institution web page related to sustainability, especially web pages within sustainability centers or offices. We also looked for and read any climate action plans, sustainability action plans, and sustainability strategic plans. We made general google searches for each of the institutions including the key words “sustainability” as well as separate searches including the key terms “climate action plan” and “sustainability action plan”. We also searched for each of these institutions sustainability centers or comparable departments on Instagram to see what their student engagement looked like on social media.

Our inventory categories were:

- **SAP Y/N** Does this institution have an SAP or CAP
- **# of Students** What is the student population of this institution
- **Public or Private Institution**
- **Office of Sustainability Y/N** *Does this institution have an office of sustainability or similar department*
- **SAP Implementation Manager Y/N** *Does this institution employ an SAP implementation manager or comparable position*
- **Sust Communication Style** *eg. modes of communication: Instagram, dashboard, etc. used to communicate sustainability progress*
- **# of Communication Styles** *How many modes of communication does this institution employ in order to communicate sustainability progress*
- **Sust Communication Content** *eg. communicates about successes, in progress projects, areas of improvement, failures, etc.*

- **Student Engagement w/ Comm Modes** *eg. number of followers on Instagram, levels of engagement with posts*
- **Who was the primary writer of the SAP, and where is the SAP documentation housed?**

Focus Group:

Due to challenges of getting students to attend without participation incentives, we decided to convene a group of sustainability-minded students, inviting clubs from a list of environmental clubs and groups across campus. We reached out to all of the sustainability and environmentally-related clubs in the University, with the goal of reaching like-minded students so that we could all have a basic understanding of sustainability and could have a conversation more focused on how to get the sustainability knowledge into the greater university community. We contacted representatives from Students for Climate Action, Students for Renewable Energy, Western Urban Planners club, the Ecological Restoration Club, the Basic Needs Hub, the Outback Farm staff, LEAD, Tiny Farm, Zero Waste Western, the Outdoor Center, the Food Insecurity Network, Bee Club, Environmental Action club, The Centers, the Vice President of Sustainability, the Student positions of the President's Sustainability Council, and Native American Student Union. We sent two emails, one as an invitation and one as a reminder. We also set up an RSVP Google Form so that we could get an estimate of how many people we could expect to attend. We also posted announcements on our social media the day of the event to invite those who would be interested, but not in one of the mentioned clubs. We advertised snacks and tea, and made sure it was known that this was a casual conversation, nothing too intense in the hopes that it would help people be less scared to come.

We started the conversation with some lighter, more get-to-know-you questions in order to get us comfortable with each other and to get us in the mindset of sustainability. Those questions were:

- What got you into sustainability/environmental work?
- What sustains your work? What keeps your focus on sustainability?
- How do you stay up to date with University and community events/news
- Social media, in person events, newsletters, etc
- What comes to mind when you think of "sustainability" and "transparency"

After we went around the table answering these questions one by one, we moved on to the deeper questions.

- How could SEI partner with you to increase engagement and support your work?
- What relationships/communication pathways do you wish were more open
- Do you have any barriers/perceived barriers to partnering with SEI?
- How would implementation look for a wider audience/tailored to sustainability

- What does transparency look like to you in the context of Western’s sustainability?
- How could WWU more publicly talk about sustainability areas of improvement without alienating stakeholders?

Interview:

We attempted to conduct interviews with a sustainability leader from each of our reach institutions. We were hoping to gain more of an insight into why they had chosen the modes of communication they were using, what their perceived level of success was, what had not worked for them, etc. We chose to do these interviews with these reach institutions as we wanted to use this plan as a way to push our institution forward, and thought we could adapt their strategies to fit our institutions needs during the recommendation phase. We did these interviews after the inventory so that we could reference information gathered during our inventory and make sure we had done background research on the institutions. Due to time constraints and a lack of responses to interview requests we were only able to conduct one interview.

In order to contact our reach institutions we identified leaders in relevant positions at each using web pages such as “About Us” and “Staff and Faculty” within the institutions sustainability pages. We reached out to as many individuals within the institution as seemed relevant, and identified these individuals by looking for key words such as “communication”, “engagement”, and “program” within these individuals' job titles. We reached out to between 2 and 5 individuals from each institution using this criteria.

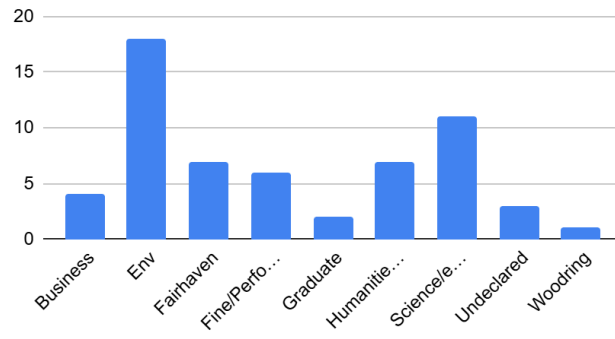
The interview questions we asked were:

<i>What is the perceived level of transparency expressed by the institution?</i>	<i>Does your institution have communication and transparency built into the SAP? How do you feel this is actually being implemented?</i>	<i>Have students in the past expressed a need for more communication regarding the SAP?</i>	<i>Can you talk about what modes of communication your institution employs and why?</i>	<i>What has made your chosen modes successful?</i>	<i>Have you had any failures in terms of communication? Why?</i>	<i>What is the target audience of your communication?</i>
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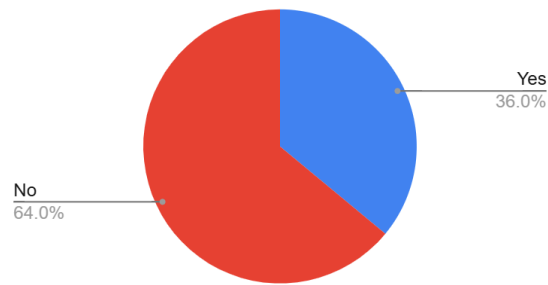
Results:

Survey Results:

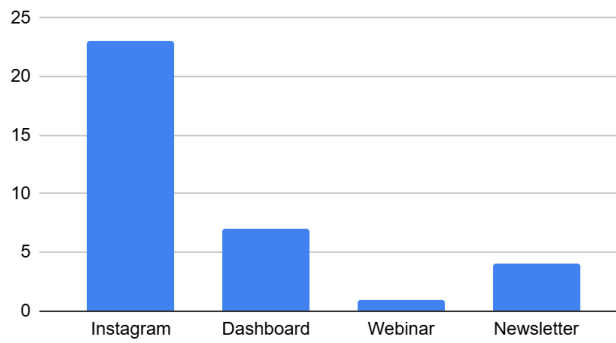
Which college do you belong to?



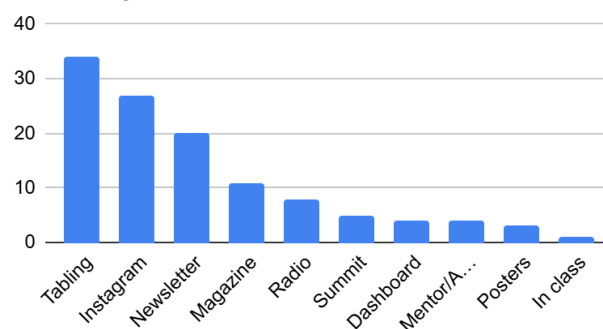
Have you heard of the SAP?



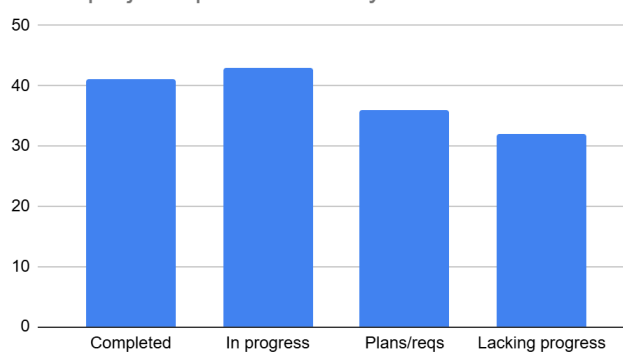
How have you heard of this progress?



How do you want to see this information?



Which project updates would you want to receive?



Inventory Results:

For full inventory results see Appendix C.

We had 5 demographic focused questions including whether the relevant institution **has an SAP** or comparable document, **has an Office of Sustainability** of comparable department, **has an SAP Implementation Manager** or comparable position, what the **student population** is, and whether it is a **private or public institution**. We found a correlation between having an SAP and/or having an Office of Sustainability, and having more modes of communication about sustainability, as well as higher perceived student engagement. We didn't see notable correlations related to student population and public or private institutions, but that is likely due to our small sample size. Only two of the institutions we looked at were "large" and only 2 were private. We did make note that having a SAP Implementation Manager position is unique, and that all institutions we inventoried either did not have anything comparable or had a council or committee whose role is implementation.

Our communication strategy and success questions were as follows:

Sustainability Communication Style: Amongst the institutions inventoried, we noticed a correlation between institutions utilizing at least some in person forms of communication, with a higher perception of student engagement. We identified 19 total modes of communication:

- Blog
- Instagram
- Reports
- Podcast
- SAP Updates
- Newsletter
- Webinars
- Dashboard
- Sustainability Campus Map
- Email Info Request
- Lecture Series
- Dinner
- Classroom Visits
- Curriculum
- Symposium
- Research Opportunities
- 1 Time Events
- Interns
- Sustainability Tour

Overall we saw 9 different styles of in person communication and 10 online. We found that 11 were passive forms of engagement, and 8 were active forms of engagement, requiring the participant to either write, speak, or make many active decisions to continue exploring information. (eg. interactive sustainability tours).

of Communication Styles: Overall we saw that the majority of the universities had more than 5 styles of communication, with 9 being the most and 1 being the least.

Sustainability Communication Content: The two most frequent forms of content we saw being shared by these institutions were sustainability successes and in-progress project updates. After that events were the most popular form of content, and then next steps/opportunities for involvement. More rarely we saw metering reports, bigger picture news, goals, metric of success, and available resources. One area we noted a lack of content in was areas of sustainability that lacked progress.

Student Engagement w/ Comm Modes: We saw an extremely variable amount of engagement on Instagram specifically, and did not find a direct correlation as to why.

Who was the primary writer of the SAP, and where is the SAP documentation housed?: We most frequently saw SAPs and similar documents being written by committees and councils with the exception of one university. One area of note is that we were only to find evidence of student engagement in the process of writing the SAP in two institutions, one of which included 2 students in the committee that wrote it, and one that mentioned using student focus groups in their writing process.

Focus Group Results:

Due to a lack of responses from students we were only able to engage with two students during our focus group. That did slightly on our conversations during the focus group, but it still provided us with an outside perspective on our topic, and we were able to talk in depth about many of our questions. We had a few main discussion points and themes emerge which are discussed in more depth below. They are listed in relative chronological order to our discussion.

Methods of Receiving WWU News and Events

Instagram was confirmed as one of the most common ways students received news and events pertaining to WWU. We were somewhat surprised to hear that Western Today and the Publicity Center were also common ways one of the students found news and events. One of the students also shared a relevant statistic with us from their department of leadership; within their email metrics they see an extremely strong decrease in the amount of time students spent reading mass emails after Fall quarter, indicating that students are much more likely to engage with this content early in the year and likely get burnt out by the end of Fall quarter.

Information Overload

Inspired by our discussion of the significant drop in email reading, we began discussing information overload. Both students expressed that although it is nice to know where to find information, having a limited amount of information presented to you is important when considering transparency. Too much information can become a barrier to accessibility, and information burnout is very real for students, especially in Winter quarter.

Bringing SAP to Classrooms and Curriculum

Bringing information to students rather than relying on them choosing to engage with content was also a topic of discussion. One thing that was brought up during this discussion was the idea of a student handbook that includes a list of information resources, with descriptions of where and how to find information and what information is public. The other main subject was the idea of bringing this content to students in classrooms via class visits or curriculum. We explored this option more when discussing the UNSDGs and SAP goals.

What Does Transparency Even Mean?

When asked what transparency meant to both students we heard them talk about information overload, navigability of information, and information content. Emphasis was put on sustainability successes at WWU and plans for improvement in the future. Navigability of information was further defined as clear overviews, with intuitive ways of finding more information, both on Instagram and on the dashboard.

How to Encourage Progress Without Alienation

When prompted to think about how to encourage progress without alienation both students thought incentivization could be a good tool. Incentives could look like public acknowledgments of success, more clear standards of what success looks like, and general positive encouragement. They also thought clearly stating what needs to happen, and framing the work as “how can we work together to complete these goals” and “what support do you need from us to complete these goals” would encourage key stakeholders to be receptive to plan making and change. Overall the students thought that creating clear and collaborative plans, and largely sharing successes would be helpful in mitigating alienation.

UNSDGs and SAP Goals as Useful Tools for Contextualizing and Engagement

Prompted by our discussion of bringing the SAP to classrooms we discussed how we might use the UNSDGs and SAP goals to help students understand that all work is connected with sustainability in some way. Both students agreed that sustainability is too frequently siloed, and that helping all students understand their place within WWU's sustainability goals and the larger UNSDGs would likely be helpful in increasing students' engagement with sustainability in the long run.

Interview Results:

We conducted one interview with a student leader of sustainability at Colorado State University.

The interview was with a graduate student, whose audience was undergrad students, mainly within the college of the environment, as well as high school students. Although this audience is slightly different than our audience, the modes of engagement still seemed relevant, and we explored what modes of communication felt most successful and any failures or barriers they experienced. Major themes that arose from this interview were the importance of in person communication avenues, the importance of using students as vessels of communication for other students, and the importance of bringing information to people rather than relying solely on them coming to you for information. The most successful forms of engagement the interviewee talked about was bi-annual visits to undergraduate classrooms, as well as a lecture series with professors and local sustainability activists or experts. One notable form of sustainability communication we talked about was the inclusion of sustainability updates in CSUs school newspaper.

Recommendations:

We used a quick demographics question to understand where our sample students were coming from. It was also a check to see if we were only collecting opinions from our College of the Environment peers, as they could skew the data with an increased level of sustainability-focused courses. We found that while there were more College of the Environment participants than any other college, it wasn't an overwhelming majority of our sample.

Our survey found that a slight majority of students had not heard of the Sustainability Action Plan prior to the survey. This outcome was about what we expected, as most people outside of the College of the Environment or involved in the SEI probably haven't had the opportunity to interact with the plan. Since there is not very much marketing or broad outreach program, the only way a student would have interacted with the plan outside of a class setting would be if they had sought the information on their own.

Since the SEI has its own Instagram, this would be a likely place for the SAP to be written about, especially with Kate's recent outreach efforts. This is also the most passive method of communication on this list. When you follow the SEI Instagram account, you will receive whatever information the SEI thinks you should see. There is a certain element of passiveness to the newsletter, but you have to know that it exists and sign up for it in order to then passively receive that information. With both the dashboard and the webinar, these resources require active participation. Not only do you have to know that these things exist, you have to sift through the vast WWU website to find the dashboard, or know the time of the webinars ahead of time in order to attend. These methods tend to be the least effective in getting basic information out there, but can provide more depth of information that an Instagram post cannot bring. However, this requires time and effort, which is usually in short supply when it comes to students.

In a surprising turn of events, tabling in Red Square, the Viking Union, or other high traffic areas, was the most popular option. However, this is great news because this means that a majority of the students in the survey want to interact face to face with the information, making it a conversation between them and an SEI representative. Another positive outcome of this response is that Instagram posts and a newsletter are the next most popular options, which are methods already in place. This makes the logistics of getting started much easier on Kate. Methods like in a student magazine or student radio are also reasonably easy to implement, as it would mostly only require a quick write-up of an SAP update, and a mention of where students could learn more information.

Lots of participants in our survey wanted to hear updates on the goals illustrated in the SAP. Again, these updates are already things that Kate is doing, which makes beginning logistics easier. With these new insights from our data collection, she can now take the information she

was already giving and put it out with our new method recommendations. Now that we know that there is significant interest in receiving updates (regardless of how that message is delivered), it makes information distribution easier because we know that people want to see it.

There is a lot of interest in receiving SAP goal updates, we just need to figure out the best way to bring that information to those that are interested. In talking with the AS President of the Sustainability Council, we have come to realize that there is a lot of information for students out there, it is just often hard to reach under the mountain of other information. What you want to know often gets caught in the shuffle. Instagram can be a great tool, but if every club, group, and department within the University has their own Instagram account, it can be hard to find the right information when you need it. However, if we put all the information into a one-stop-shop for every single event on campus it would be impossible to navigate. A balance must be found between sharing too much information and not enough.

To maintain a balanced flow of information sharing we identified 4 major ways to communicate SAP updates to students on Western's campus. These forms of communication attempt to address both students who are already interested and engaged with sustainability on campus, as well as students who may have an interest in sustainability but are unsure how they can engage with it on campus and in their studies.

Instagram:

Instagram should be used as a highlight reel, a place to share when something new and exciting happens, but large chunks of text and lots of detail should be saved for people who want to deep dive into the information.

In the short term, big updates to the SAP and its goals should be uploaded to the SEI's Instagram with a quick blurb about what happened and what it means for the University/department/applicable groups. Then, a more detailed description can be available in a LinkTree in the SEI's Instagram bio for those who would like to learn more about that SAP goal. To get more people to follow the SEI's Instagram, and therefore increasing the amount of people who see the SAP updates, interns, or other students involved in the SEI, could do a 1-day takeover of the general WWU account. They could showcase what work they do at the SEI, ways students could get involved, things SEI does around campus students might not think of, etc. Not only does this bring more people to the SEI account, it also would make people more aware of what the SEI is and does. A lot of people who follow the general WWU account are also prospective students, and the takeover could potentially draw in new students.

In general, leaning on student workers and recent graduate workers will ensure that the instagram feels relevant to the student body. In addition to outsourcing some Instagram outreach work to

student workers and recent graduates, consulting with Western's Social Media Coordinator would aid in ensuring the SEI Instagram is relevant and appropriate.

Newsletter:

Students showed interest in receiving a monthly newsletter, a method that is currently in place. In our survey, 40% of students checked the box saying they were interested in a newsletter as a way to receive SAP updates. This could be a good way to provide more detailed information and context than what an Instagram post can provide for those that want it. It is also a passive form of communication, as once they sign up for the newsletter, they will receive updates through their email and they don't have to go searching for them, the updates will come to them. For students wanting specific information at one time, but don't necessarily want recurring updates, the newsletters should be posted to the website to be accessed at any time. This way, students can see past updates. As of the time of this report, only the most recent newsletter is accessible via the SEI website, but that's easy enough to change. To gain new readership, sneak peaks can be written and added to school-wide newsletters like Western Today, as well as a link for students to sign up for the sustainability newsletter if they would like to. One note that was made during our focus group session was that peak engagement with newsletters is during fall quarter, and engagement declines significantly through the rest of the year. We suggest that newsletter communication is emphasized earlier in the academic year when students are more likely to engage with this method, and less emphasized as the year continues.

In-Person Engagement:

One of the main themes that emerged from the inventory and interviews was the importance for in person forms of engagement with students. This need was also exemplified in the survey results; with the number one way students thought they would engage with the information was through tabling. For this reason we feel that finding an in-person form of communication would be vital to increasing engagement with students in the long-term. The least monetarily intensive options for increasing in-person engagement are to

1. Continue and increase tabling.
2. Continue the existing student ambassador position focused on sustainability outreach, and increase collaborations between the student ambassador and the SAP implementation manager.
3. Bring back the previously instituted student sustainability ambassador program. Connecting with Dora Vaughn would be a good first step to reviving a similar program as she runs campus housing sustainability.
4. Host one-time events or lectures that are focused on the intersection of sustainability with other topics. This would aim to bring in an audience that is studying or passionate about a topic other than sustainability, and hopefully would allow them to see how it fits into sustainability.

An SEI open house would be a good way to kickstart these conversations and engagement. This way students could get exposure to what the SEI is and what they do, and find ways to become more involved. These would all involve quite a bit of planning to implement, and therefore we see these as being potentially enacted in a 5 year plan rather than more immediately, however we still feel having some version of these styles of engagement would be key to truly increasing engagement in a lasting manner. Based on the interviews it seems that a form of engagement led by students might be the most well received by other students (eg. student sustainability ambassador program and student ambassador).

Curriculum Integration:

Integration of sustainability into university wide curriculum emerged as a topic in both the focus group and the interview. This would require collaboration with both the curriculum committee and relevant professors. Bringing information to students was a theme that emerged in every data collection method. Students are already often burnt out and overwhelmed, so integrating this information into places and activities they are already doing would likely reach a much wider audience. This could be achieved by including mention of the UNSDGs and their relevance to all areas of study as part of curriculum in many entry-level, large courses at Western Washington University. A topic of discussion in the focus group was the intersectionality of sustainability and the misunderstanding that you cannot focus on sustainability and something else. By having professors highlight how many different disciplines fall within the UNSDGs, and perhaps within Western's own SAP as well, we might be able to help students understand how intersectional

sustainability is. This could look like having 100 level economic and business classes discuss SDG number 1, no poverty, having education majors discuss SDG number 4, quality education, women and gender social studies discuss SDG number 10, reduced inequalities, etc. This would serve as a quick way to contextualize students' learning within sustainability goals, and encourage them to look to their own institutions' goals as context for their education. Enacting this would likely take having many conversations with professors to discuss the feasibility of this strategy, and identifying key professors who may be willing to pilot it.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Project success will be tracked in both qualitative and quantitative ways:
 - Qualitative—website traffic, link/email traffic, social media activity, students contacted during tabling sessions
 - Quantitative—potential further surveys/student feedback in several years to follow up on progress, conducting a larger survey similar to our survey that asks about students familiarity with Western’s sustainability goals and how sustainability fits within their learning/career goals.

Sponsors should pay attention to student engagement specifically. While other stakeholders are significant, of course, students represent one of the largest parts of the WWU community and are a large factor in change making at the university, especially with progress on sustainability. Our initial survey results could be used as a baseline data set to compare with future surveys for a “before and after” comparison of communication strategy successes.

Surveys and check-ins should be done on a regular basis, about every 2-3 years as students change and their ways of receiving information evolves. What works for students now might not work for students 5 years from now, and by checking in we can make sure that the outreach work is doing what it is supposed to do: connecting students to the important information. This can be done in a variety of creative ways.

Budget:

Although some of our recommendations would require funding, such as the student ambassador position, these are better suited to a more long-term plan and could be adjusted to fit budget constraints as needed. The more immediate actions within the next few quarters are low budget but require labor input from the SEI team. Expenses for our recommendations of increased tabling and social media presence mostly consist of additional advertisement materials such as stickers, posters, and pamphlets. Overall, the funding required for our recommendations is very low.

Conclusion:

Throughout our process of understanding what transparency of communication looks like, and how we can help Kate Beck implement it, we found solidarity with other institutions struggling in the same way. In the age of information overload, it can be hard to identify how best to communicate essential information, and encourage more active engagement from students. Students want to have access to essential information related to their institutions actions towards sustainability, however it can be surprisingly difficult to navigate effective modes of communication.

Throughout our research we found that other institutions had success in this communication by reducing information overload on platforms like Instagram, and spending time ensuring their webpages and dashboard are intuitive and navigable. We also found that other institutions saw more engagement when information about sustainability was brought to students, through classroom visits, inclusion in curriculum, and more. Many institutions also had sustainability engagement programs with student leaders, which seems to increase student engagement.

After considering our findings, and thinking about the time capacity of Kate Beck, the financial standing of WWU, and our own student body we thought that focusing on making sure the Instagram is a highlight reel, and having direct links front the Instagram to the dashboard would be the first step in bettering our communication. In the long term we suggest approaching faculty outside the College of the Environment as well as the curriculum committee to pilot inclusion of the SAP and UNSDGs in intro level courses across the University. Hopefully understanding how your learning and career goals are interconnected with sustainability regardless of your path of study will empower students to engage more with sustainability than they otherwise might feel comfortable. Lastly we wanted to make note of the importance of student leadership in the long term goals of sustainability communication engagement by including a few options for the future of programs we believe are feasible at WWU. The first of these programs is to continue the SEI student ambassador program and strengthen collaboration with Kate. The second would be bringing back the student sustainability ambassador program that existed previously on campus. We hope that these strategies will effectively increase engagement with students about the SAP and UNSDGs and empower students to contextualize their education within sustainability, and encourage a more intersectional perspective on sustainability.

References

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United Nations Development Programme, 2024.

<https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/worlds-largest-survey-climate-change-out-heres-what-results-show>

Appendix A

Focus Group Agenda:

- Approximately 1 hour
 - 5 min intros
 - Set ground guidelines
 - Purpose: to learn how best to communicate SAP content and updates with students
 - Tone: thank you for being here, used positivity, value contributions
 - Name tags
 - Explain confidentiality
 - None of the things said would be traced back to any individual, this is a safe place to discuss both the positives and the negatives of the SAP and the SEI
 - 10 min brainstorm
 - Sticky note table question exercise to get people moving and bring dynamic energy
 - 30 min discussion
 - Facilitator asked prompting, but not leading, questions
 - Notetaker quoted and summarized
 - In small groups or one group, depending on turnout
 - 10 min summary recap
 - Restated points made, asked for clarification
 - 5 min closing
 - Thanked participants for their time
 - Provided resources for learning more/staying tuned in (website, Instagram, etc.)



Appendix B:

Student view of the survey

Sustainability Communication

We are 3 students helping the Sustainability Engagement Institute gather information about how to improve their Sustainability Action Plan outreach efforts! Thank you for your time!

quatsok@wwu.edu [Switch account](#)

 Not shared 

Have you heard about WWU's progress on its sustainability goals in its Sustainability Action Plan?

- Yes
 No

The [Sustainability Action Plan](#) site, if you want to take a look around!

How have you learned about this progress?

- Instagram
 WWU's Sustainability Dashboard
 Webinars
 Newsletter

I would be more likely to see this information if it was

- In a WWU magazine (Klipsun, The Planet)
 On the student radio station (KUGS)
 On the WWU's sustainability dashboard
 In a Sustainability Institute Instagram post
 A newsletter
 A part of a sustainability mentorship ambassador program
 Shared at table in Red Square/Viking Union
 Shared at a Western Sustainability Summit
 Other: _____

What progress updates do you want to hear about?

- Completed projects
 In-progress projects
 Areas lacking progress
 Plans/requirements to reach a goal

What college does your degree fall under?

- College of Business and Economics
 College of Fine and Performing Arts
 College of Humanities and Social Sciences
 College of Science and Engineering
 College of the Environment
 Woodring College of Education
 Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies
 Graduate School
 Undeclared

[Submit](#)

[Clear form](#)

Appendix C:

B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Institution + Interviewee (if applicable)	SAP Y/N Does this institution have an SAP or CAP	# of Students What is the student population of this institution	Public or Private Institution	Office of Sustainability Y/N Does this institution have an office of sustainability or similar department	SAP Implementation Manager Y/N Does this institution employ an SAP implementation manager or comparable position	Sust Communication Style eg. modes of communication: instagram, dashboard, etc. used to communicate sustainability progress
Western Washington University	Yes, SAP	14700 (medium)	Public	yes	yes	
Colorado State University	Yes, CAP and SSP	26000 (large)	Public	Yes	No	Lecture series, dinner, blog x2, instagram, facilities management reports, going into classrooms
MIT	Yes, CAP	11500 (medium)	Private	yes	No - it is a group of faculty called the nucleus	Through curriculum, symposiums, research opportunities, events, articles/blogs (so many dif ones), podcast, instagram, datapool, metering
University of Washington	Yes, SAP	52000 (large)	Public	yes	No- but it does have an exectutive committee that meets monthly to ensure implementation of SAP	SAP updates yearly, metering, blog, newsletter, webinars, instagram

I	J	K	L
# of Communication Styles How many modes of communication does this institution employ in order to communicate sustainability progress	Sust Communciation Content eg. communicates about successes, in progress projects, areas of improvement, failures, etc.	Student Engagement w/ Comm Modes eg. number of followers on instagram, levels of engagement with posts. If in interview, # of students signed up for newsletter, showing up to events, etc.	Who was the primary writer of the SAP, and where is the SAP documentation housed?
			sustainability engagement institute
5	Events, successes, in progress projects, metering	Low engagement on posts, apparent high engagement in clubs and sustainability center	President's sustainability commission, 2 of 5 seats are students
9	events, successes, in progress projects	high engagement on instagram	Office of sustainabiliyt, Office of the vice president for sustainability, climate portal
5	events, successes, in progress	low engagement on instagram	sustainability action plan exectutive committee, office of sustainability

Institution + Interviewee (if applicable)	SAP Y/N Does this institution have an SAP or CAP	# of Students What is the student population of this institution	Public or Private Institution	Office of Sustainability Y/N Does this institution have an office of sustainability or similar department	SAP Implementation Manager Y/N Does this institution employ an SAP implementation manager or comparable position	Sust Communication Style eg. modes of communication: Instagram, dashboard, etc. used to communicate sustainability progress
University of Washington	Yes, SAP	52000 (large)	Public	yes	Committee that meets monthly to ensure implementation of SAP	meeting, blog, newsletter, webinars, Instagram
University of Wisconsin	No—in process, currently just a signatory of the Second Nature Resilience Commitment and has announced an "environmental sustainability initiative"	48000 (large)	Public	yes	No—there are several positions that address different aspects of sustainability efforts (ex. Dashboard manager, communications and engagement, design/engineering, etc.)	-Office of sustainability internship (multiple teams), sustainability podcast, sustainability news blurbs on dashboard, online dashboard for net-zero efforts, "how we're getting there" dashboard updates for different aspects of sustainability, campus sustainability map oriented around SDGs, annual sustainability symposium
Humboldt State University	yes, CAP	6000 (medium)	Public	yes	no—instead has the Humboldt Advisory committee on Sustainability (students, staff, faculty) who implement dashboard and initiatives	Sustainability dashboard, sustainability committee annual report, maps and tours, monthly newsletter, recent happenings page/sustainability news, CAP has a short video summary and online comment form
Eastern Illinois University	No	6849 (medium)	Public	No, but they do have a Center for Clean Energy Research and Education	No	Email info request form,
University of Puget Sound	Climate action plan	2000 (small)	Private	A sustainability action committee	A sustainability advisory committee, made up of students, faculty, and staff. Has subcommittees for climate, consumption, curriculum, outreach, and executive (runs meetings, budget, etc.), a director of sustainability named Lexi Brewer	An interactive sustainability map, lots of good info on their website about different aspects of sustainability on the website

I	J	K	L
# of Communication Styles <i>How many modes of communication does this institution employ in order to communicate sustainability progress</i>	Sust Communciation Content <i>eg. communicates about successes, in progress projects, areas of improvement, failures, etc.</i>	Student Engagement w/ Comm Modes <i>eg. number of followers on instagram, levels of engagement with posts. If in interview, # of students signed up for newsletter, showing up to events, etc.</i>	Who was the primary writer of the SAP, and where is the SAP documentation housed?
5	events, successes, in progress	low engagement on instagram	executive committee, office of sustainability
5	events, news, progress	instagram account with varied engagement, but recent posts with 1,000+ interactions	N/a
7	goals, metrics for performance, next steps and involvement information	instagram page with very low involvement, "sustainability Saturdays" postings to main university account in progress	Lead author of CAP 2.0–Morgan King (climate action analyst), with many other working groups contributing. Publish 2021-22, housed on website as PDF
1	Explains the purpose of the institute, a mission statement, and a couple short videos to introduce the faculty	No institute instagram, no sustainability mention in the main instagram	N/A
2	Sustainability services site, a campus sustainability site with resources like a bike shop, a food salvage program, a campus lending library, a community garden, and an ORCA card rental program	A pretty active dedicated sustainability Instagram, about a thousand followers	Lexi Brewer

Appendix D:



**Increase
Accessibility of
WWU's
Sustainability
Action Plan with
a 1-2 minute
survey!**



(It's for a
student
project <3)