

Aligning Western’s Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Executive Summary

Problem Statement

Western Washington University (WWU) prides itself as a national leader in sustainability among institutions of higher education. In September of 2017, WWU published its first 20-year Sustainability Action Plan (SAP), what the institution identifies as its “road map for protecting local and global ecology, upholding social equity, creating economic vitality, and maintaining human health” (SAP, 2017). When work on the SAP began, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals had just been published and it was yet unclear if and how cities, organizations, countries, and institutions of higher education were going to address them. The SDGs are 17 interconnected goals, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, that address environmental, health, economic, education, inequality, and poverty concerns globally. The goals are a blueprint that serve to create peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future (SDG, 2017). Several years have passed since the SDGs were published and there is now momentum in higher education to align institutional plans with them. Western’s SAP was not initially written to align with the SDGs, and it is unclear to what extent, if at all, the plan aligns. This assessment will serve to address this problem and offer a clear answer as to the extent the SAP aligns with the SDGs.

Description of Assessment

This is an assessment of Western’s SAP to identify how well, and where, it aligns to the SDGs. The primary stakeholder for this assessment is Susanna Hamilton, Sustainability Action Plan Coordinator, and author of the plan. She has identified this assessment of the SAP as a way to support the institution in making progress toward and achieving its goals. Secondary stakeholders include the institution, which prides itself as a leader in sustainability, whom the responsibility inevitably lies to accept and assign the work identified necessary to continue progress. This assessment will look at specific elements of the plan and see how well it aligns with the SDGs, specifically which of the seventeen goals and their objectives correlate.* The results of this assessment will be used to help support Western’s progress, providing additional direction for the SAP.

*Each of the goals contain numerous objectives, and due to the time constraints of this class this assessment will not go into all of the objectives or sub-objectives of each goal.

Summary of Recommendations

The case study research illustrates other universities aligning their plans to the SDGs and it is recommended that Western take note of these examples to serve as rationale for them to follow suit. In order for Western to maintain its status as a leader in sustainability, Western should align their SAP to the SDGs including: focusing on addressing a handful of the SDGs, making sure that the SAP addresses all of the SDGs, or to focus on a few SDGs while still addressing all SDGs. Incorporating SDG language into the SAP will further strengthen Western’s commitment to sustainability, standardizing terminology will enable partners to understand the SAP more easily.

Introduction

Statement of Need and Assessment Goals

The assessment goals are to note which categories of Western's Sustainability Action Plan align with the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, then use the findings to address what benefits more aligned goals could provide. The outcome of this assessment is of particular importance to Susanna Hamilton because aligning to the SDGs will provide a universal sustainability measurement that can be used to support implementation and the overall effectiveness and scope of Western's plan. It also provides a refined direction for the current plan, as well as considerations for future updates and revisions. Aligning its SAP with the SDGs is also an opportunity for Western to continue to lead the way in pioneering sustainability practices, setting an example for other institutions of higher education.

Background Research

Background research for this assessment entailed discussing the SAP and the assessment goals with the stakeholder, as well as interviewing people who have worked closely with the SDGs. The stakeholder explained the purpose behind the SAP and why assessing whether or not it aligns with the SDGs is important. She highlighted the fact that the SAP was published the same year as the SDGs and thus did not purposefully address any of the goals. A few years have passed since the two have been published and it has become evident that the SDGs are a universal measurement of sustainability; as such, assessing the extent of SAP alignment to it is worthwhile. Three people who have all worked closely with the SDGs were interviewed to gain further insight as to what the SDGs were and why a university would want to align their sustainability plan to them. Other universities have begun to address the SDGs in their sustainability plans indicating the direction many universities are heading.

Methodology

In order to offer recommendations on how Western can align its SAP with the SDGs, research was needed to understand how other institutions have accomplished this. The SDG Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) partnership website outlines institutions of higher education, governments, organizations, and businesses that are official partners with the UN and the specific SDGs they address (HESI, 2019). The partnership is not limited to any specific number of SDGs, it is up to the organization or institution to determine what their focus is. This assessment examined the website for any US university that was a partner. An inventory template was used to organize the collected data. *Table 1* displays the data that was collected from the website, what SDG they address, and the start date of the partnership. This data strengthened this assessment while also identifying examples of other universities that have successfully aligned their action plans with the SDGs.

In order to analyze Western's SAP alignment with the UN SDGs, an understanding of the rationale behind each SAP goal and objective was required. Once properly understood, the UN SDG website was referred to when determining whether or not a SAP goal or objective aligned

with a SDG (SDG, 2017). While the SDGs are described in great detail by the UN, the final decision of whether or not a SDG was addressed by a SAP was left to our own discretion. A data sheet and visual references were used to display all of the goals and objectives in the SAP and the SDGs they addressed. Discrepancies in the results due to this method choice was acknowledged, but this method was deemed satisfactory given the time constraint of this assessment. Alternative methods were considered, but were deemed to be outside the scope of this assessment.

Results

The collected data is displayed in various formats below to highlight key facts. Future edits in the plan will rely on this data to know where the SAP excels and where it falls short in aligning with the SDGs.

Table 1: This table contains examples of other institutions that have partnered with the UN HESI program to incorporate specific SDGs into their respective plans. The table contains the institution name, the initiative name, which SDGs they addressed, and the start date of the initiative (HESI, 2019). Only four institutions within the US are official partners with the HESI program out of the 354 partners globally, the lack of US institutions part of the program should be noted (HESI, 2019). It should also be noted that the number of SDGs that an institution focused on ranged from only one to all seventeen.

Table 2: *See appendix.* This table shows exactly which objective under each category of the SAP aligned with each SDG as well as the SDGs that were not addressed at all (SDG, 2017; SAP 2017). It is possible that our method for collecting this data could be biased as the interpretation of the SAP objectives and the SDGs might have varied for each of us. Any possible biases of our results will not be taken into consideration as there is not a feasible method to account such possibilities. It should be noted that the rationale behind each SAP objective was thoroughly understood as well as each SDG prior to collecting this data.

Figure 1: This chart illustrates the percentage of the SAP that align with the SDGs based on number of SDG goals addressed or not. Our assessment of the SAP shows a 65% alignment with the SDGs with 35% of the SAP not addressing any SDGs. Each objective in the SAP was reviewed and then determined whether or not it addressed a SDG. Following this method, it was determined the SAP satisfies eleven of the seventeen SDGs.

Figure 2: Each category of the SAP contains a number of objectives outlining requirements to satisfy their respective categories' goal. When aligning the documents, the SAP objectives often met more than one of the SDGs. This figure illustrates the number of SAP objectives that satisfied each SDG. It should be noted that numerous SAP objectives satisfied more than one SDG. SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 14, and 15 were outliers as zero SAP objectives addressed with them. SDGs 4, 9, 11, and 12 were outliers due to the sheer number of SAP objectives that addressed

with them. SDG 11 and 12 were the two highest with 56 and 54 SAP objectives addressing them respectively. SDG 4 and 9 were the next two highest with 31 and 30 SAP objectives addressing them respectively.

Figure 3: This graph illustrates the categories of the SAP that are most aligned with the SDGs. There are a total of ten categories in the SAP; the number of aligned objectives from each category determined the alignment of the overall category. This data provides information on which categories emphasize the SDGs and which categories need improvement. Every category in the SAP addressed at the minimum one SDG. The Waste and Engagement categories tied for the highest, addressing seven SDGs.

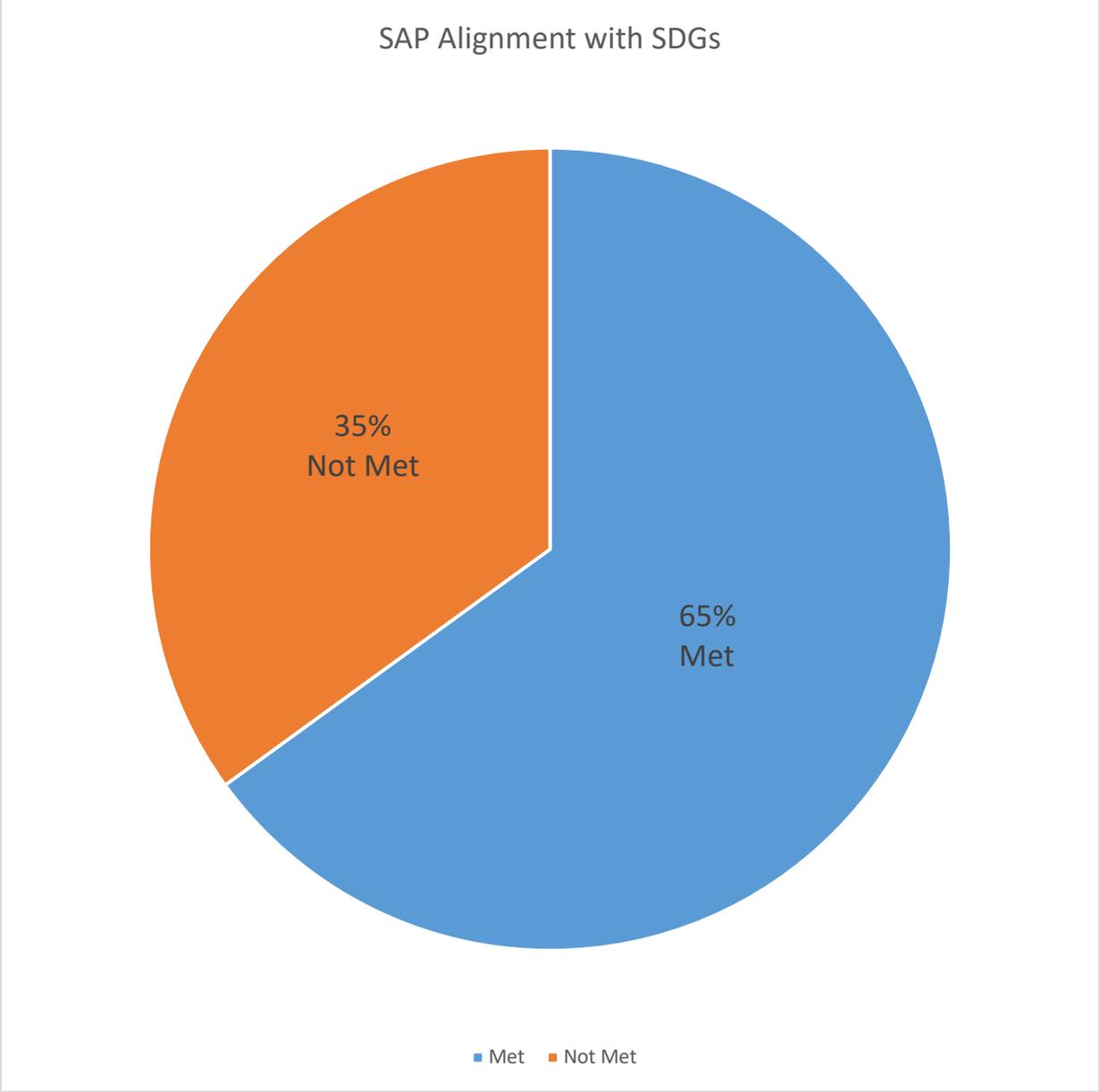


Figure 1: Percentage of SAP aligned to the SDGs

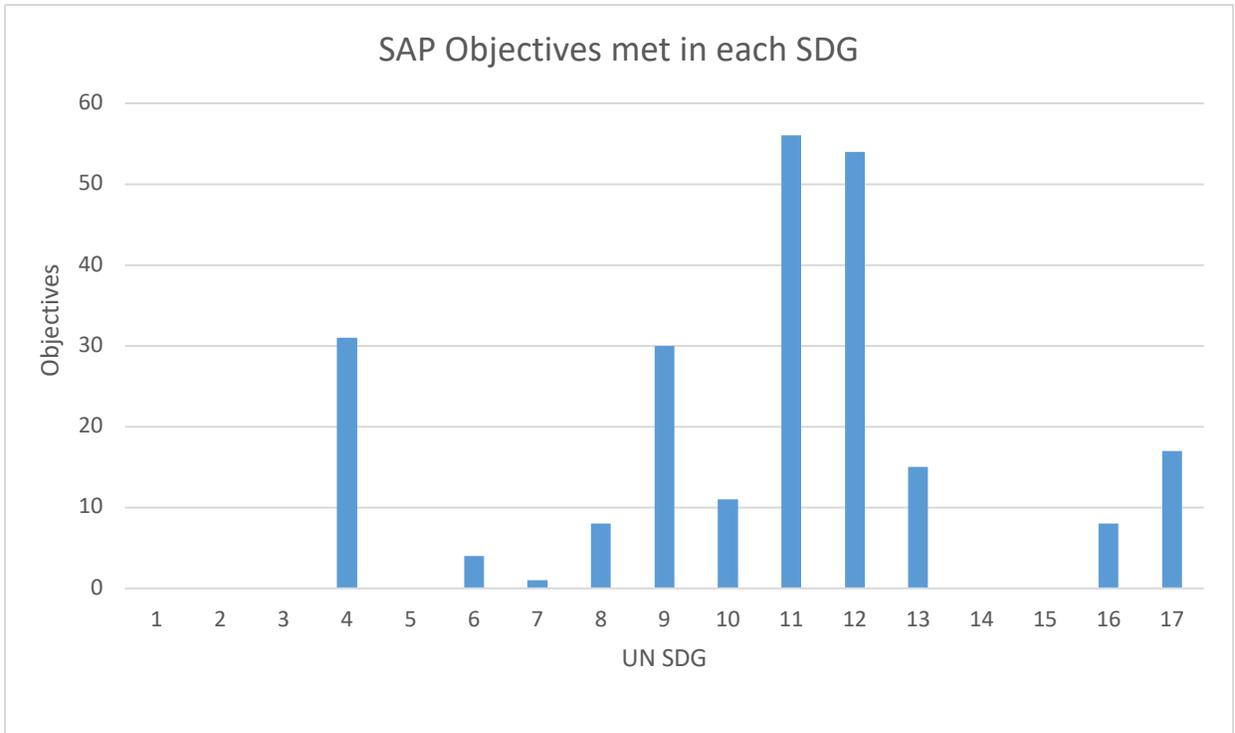


Figure 2: Number of objectives met in each SDG

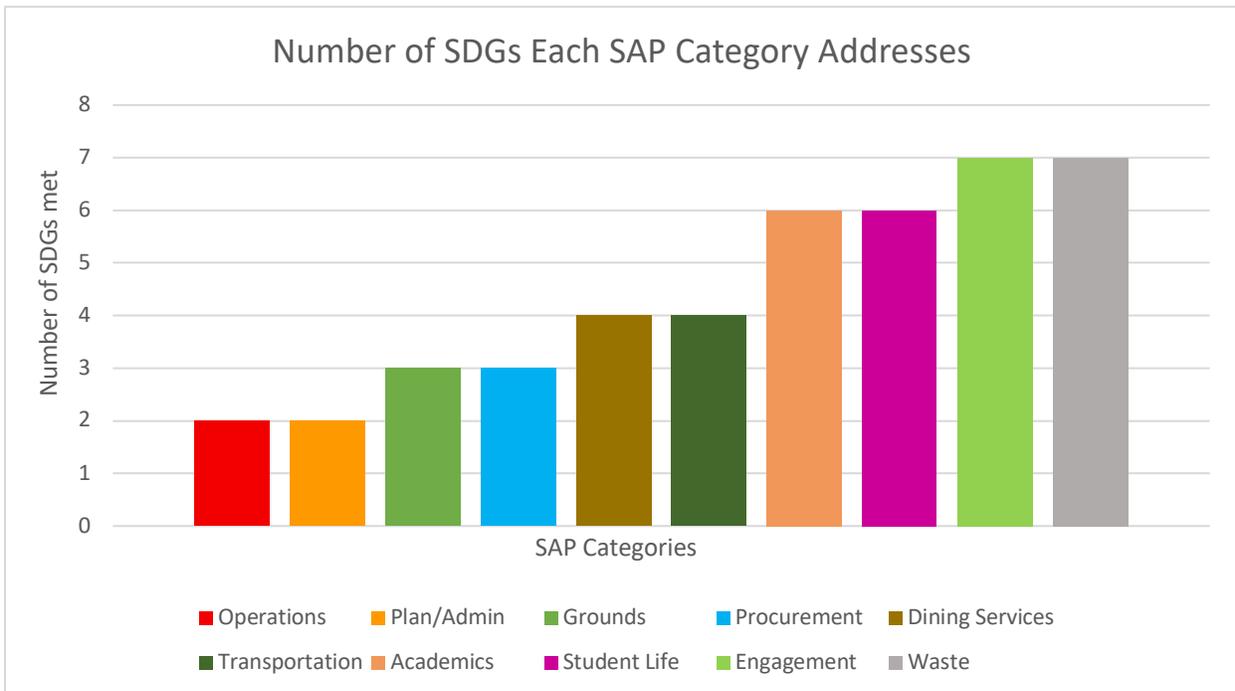


Figure 3: Number of SDGs each SAP category addresses

University	Initiative Name	SDGs	Start Date
University of Arizona	Environment and Sustainable Development Initiative	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17	17 July, 2017
Portland Community College	Campus Climate Action Plan	4	25 October, 2018
University of San Francisco	Sustainable Development Initiative	12, 13, 14, 15, 17	September 5, 2016
Stanford University	Sustainable Urban Systems Initiative	All 17	July, 2017

Table 1: Inventory template of example universities (HESI, 2019)

Recommendations

This assessment is the first to assess the extent to which Western’s SAP aligns with the UN’s SDGs. Based off of the results, a number of objectives identified in the SAP that failed to address any SDG. Analysis of the HESI website identified universities in the US that align one or more of the SDGs to their plans (HESI, 2019). Western should strive to become an official HESI partner as it would strengthen the university’s commitment towards sustainability and grant Western access to a large network to work with and learn from. For Western to continue its leadership as an institution that values sustainability, it is recommended that changes be made to directly address one or more SDGs in the SAP. Incorporating SDG language into the SAP would strengthen Western’s commitment to sustainability and would become easier to understand by others familiar with the SDGs. It is recommended that future assessments at Western concerned with SAP/SDG alignment implement a *recurring* monitoring system for keeping track of SAP/SDG alignment to better and continually assess the state of SAP/SDG alignment.

The data collected demonstrates that the current SAP addresses all but six SDGs to varying extents. However, nowhere in the SAP was any SDG directly referenced or addressed. This is an area future versions of the SAP should address. Because the SDGs are comprised of seventeen interconnected goals, it is not surprising that Western’s SAP addresses a large number of them. This coincidence is something Western should be proud of, but future edits of the SAP should address the lack of direct references to the SDGs.

While eleven of the seventeen SDGs were addressed to varying extents in the SAP, SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 14, and 15 were not addressed at all. This is something Western should take note of and determine whether or not all of the SDGs should be addressed in the SAP. As shown in *Figure 2*, SDGs 4, 9, 11, and 12 stood out due to the high number of SAP objectives that addressed them. Future changes to the SAP should take into consideration how many and which SDGs should be

directly addressed. Due to the interconnectedness of the SDGs, it is inevitable that multiple SDGs will be addressed in the SAP whether or not it was intended. The HESI case studies illustrated in *Table 1* show that most universities only address a handful of SDGs, with Stanford University being the only university to address all seventeen. If Western were to become a HESI partner with its current SAP, it would have the option to either address the eleven SDGs that this assessment found it to be currently in alignment with, reduce, or expand that number as Western saw fit.

If Western wishes to continue its leadership in sustainability among institutions of higher education, cities, or governments wishing to align their respective plans with the SDGs, it is recommended for Western to reevaluate their goals and decide how many SDGs they wish to align with and to what extent. The operations and academics category of the SAP (*see Figure 3*) address the lowest number of SDGs. This could serve as a starting point for Western to strengthen the plan's alignment with the SDGs. This type of leadership has the potential to affect social, environmental, and political realms, nationally and internationally. Change, however, will not be immediate; to accomplish this task it will require a multi-year timeline. It is not within the scope of this assessment to estimate what the timeline might look like, but it will require cooperation amongst all of the colleges and their respective deans and administrators. It will require a university-wide, collaborative effort to accomplish such a goal.

Monitoring and Evaluation

This assessment is a one-time review of the SAP and SDGs, and thus has had no monitoring component required. Future monitoring will involve the new stakeholder, in conjunction with the Sustainability Advisory Committee, which reports directly to President Sabah Randhawa, to determine the direction of the university and whether or not aligning the SAP to the SDGs is in its best interest. If the institution were to back this assessment, it would speed up the process of making the necessary changes to the SAP. It will take several years for the changes to the SAP to begin to take effect within the university, but having the committee and president backing the assessment would most likely result in quicker results. Alignment of the SAP with the SDGs would bring a broader legitimacy to the SAP as well as leverage for the departments within the university to reach their respective objectives.

As noted in the recommendations section, aligning the SAP to the SDGs will solidify Western's position as a leader in sustainability and serve as an example for other universities. Success of this assessment can be measured by whether or not the university decides to further align the SAP to the SDGs. This might be in the form of directly referencing the SDGs in the SAP, establishing an official partnership with the UN HESI program to become a SDG partner, focusing on specific SDGs, or deciding to try and address all seventeen SDGs. Acknowledgment that future assessments of SAP alignment to the SDGs will provide the opportunity to analyze alignment to a greater extent than was possible in this assessment.

Budget

The deliverables of this assessment consist of the data and initial alignment done by the authors of this assessment. There are no required actions or policy implementations directly associated with this assessment and thus a budget was not necessary. Given that our current stakeholder, Susanna Hamilton, is set to step down by the end of the 2018-2019 academic year. Part of the 2019-2020 budget might go toward hiring new staff to further this assessment. This is assuming that Western has decided to make changes to the SAP to further align it with the SDGs. After any changes to the SAP are made, there may be unknown costs associated with implementing the plan, such as hiring new staff or establishing new infrastructure required to complete certain objectives. Any costs associated with continuation of this assessment will be left to the discretion of the president of the university.

Conclusion

This assessment provides a baseline of the SAP's overall alignment with the SDG, determining that a majority of the objectives in the SAP, 65%, address one or more of the seventeen SDGs. Serving as a starting point for Western to evaluate its SAP and decide upon a course of action. The data gathered illustrates how well the SAP currently aligns with the SDGs and will serve as an example to Western that other institutions have aligned their plans with one or more of the SDGs, strengthening the case for Western to follow suit. In order to maintain its position as a leader in sustainability among institutions of higher education, it is recommended that Western take note of this assessment and decide how to further align with the SDGs. Other universities have begun to align their plans to the SDGs and it is recommended for Western to consider following suit. By connecting the SAP with the SDGs, other institutions of higher education, cities, and countries may turn to Western for guidance in aligning their respective sustainability plans with the SDGs. Western's values and actions in the past, as well as the present, demonstrate the importance of sustainability to the university, and by aligning the SAP to the SDGs it will further validate Western's commitment to sustainability, solidifying its position as a national and global leader.

Appendix

Table 2: Raw data collected illustrating the SAP category objectives and which SDG they addressed

SDG	SAP Category Objectives									
	Academics	Engagement	Student Life	Operations	Dining Services	Grounds	Procurement	Transportation	Waste	Planning and Administration
1										
2										
3										
4	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.3	1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4							3.1, 3.2,
5										
6				4.1	1.3	1.2, 1.3			2.3	
7				2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5	2.2				2.3	
8									1.5, 2.8, 3.1, 3.2	
9	4.1	1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5,		1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1	1.2		1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2,	1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 2.1, 2.2	2.2, 2.3, 3.2, 4.1,	

		3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3					3.3, 5.1			
10	1.2	3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,	1.1, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4,						3.1	
11	1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1	1.3, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 3.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,	1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4,				1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 3.1, 4.1,	
12	1.3,	2.6	2.1	2.7	1.3, 2.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4,	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4,	1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3,	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 4.2, 4.3, 3.1,	
13								1.1, 1.2,		

								1.5, 1.6, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4		
14										
15										
16	1.2, 2.3,	1.3, 2.3, 4.2	1.1, 2.1, 2.4							
17	1.4, 2.1, 3.1, 4.2	1.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3	1.3							2.6, 3.2

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