

***Advancing Western Washington University's AASHE STARS  
Program and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).***

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## **Executive Summary**

### *Problem Statement*

Western Washington University (WWU) is one of the nation's leading examples of sustainable learning and practices according to the Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and determined by the Sustainable Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS). With STARS rating WWU a silver 60.52 score in 2019, the university lacks numerous sustainable endeavors. When WWU underwent its last rating from STARS the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) had been announced three years prior. Although Western was acknowledged for certain sustainable practices when it comes to air and climate usage, coordinating and practicing, and diversity and affordability, the university failed to commit to the UNs global goals for a sustainable future. Western's current university function and routine according to STARS does not align with the UNSDGs but with the help of students, faculty, and AASHE, Western can incorporate the UNSDGs to pursue a brighter and longer future for the campus and university.

### *Description of Project*

This project is an assessment of Western's STARS rating to identify where the university can advance or add sustainable practices by incorporating the UNSDGs. The purpose of this assessment is to get the university committed to incorporating all 17 Sustainable Development Goals on campus, especially in places where sustainable solutions lack, to offer students the tools necessary to critically think and take on long term solutions for growing problems. The primary stakeholder and supporter for this assessment is Grace Wang, the Chair of the Environmental Studies Department at Huxley College of the Environment. Wang has identified this project and proposed solution to be a feasible, productive, and valuable implementation to Western Washington University. Secondary stakeholders include other department and committee chairs (ie Academic Coordinating Committee) along with the university institution itself as they are responsible for deeming this assessment necessary and taking this from an idea to reality. The results of this assessment will be used to better Westerns STARS rating and to provide additional information for the university to see where sustainable practices still need to be met.

### *Summary of Recommendations*

Thanks to STARS, sustainable practices from universities all over the United States are written down in one cohesive place and gives Western examples of sustainable solutions. In order for Western to remain a leader in sustainability in higher education, it is important that the university takes notes on what other campuses are doing, and more importantly, commits to implementing the UNSDGs. Incorporating SDG understanding, vocabulary, and objectives will heighten Western's commitment to sustainability, maintain the university's leadership status, and act as a role model and example for other higher education schools to follow.

## **Introduction**

### Statement of Need

The assessment goals are to identify where the UNSDGs best fit into Western's current curriculum. In order for Western to maintain its status of being a leading university in sustainable action, Western should implement SDG learning into each undergraduate requirement attribute at the university. The conclusion and outcome of this proposed assignment is of great importance to the student body and to Grace Wang and Lindsey MacDoland (Director of Sustainability at WWU).

### Project Goals

The goal of this project is to get the University to take a more sustainable and environmentally oriented approach to undergraduate curriculum. The goal is to assign sustainable development goals to each graduate university requirement (GUR) attribute. There will be some GUR attributes that have more than one SDG attached to them but the SDGs will be divided up into specific classes to which they apply or best fit within the GUR attribute. The purpose of this is to ensure that each undergraduate student receives teaching on sustainable solutions and will further allow Western to remain a climate justice and sustainable solution oriented university. The only caveat of this goal is that some transfer students coming in with basic undergrad classes may miss the opportunity to learn about the SDGs at Western. Western should align their environmentally friendly practices with individual Sustainable Development Goals to create a greener campus, and more environmentally conscious student body.

### Background Research

Background research for this project required various meetings with the stakeholder, Grace Wang, to gain information on where and where not sustainable solutions are being taught on campus. The stakeholder gave insight on the feasibility of the goals of this assessment and acted as a source of critical information and support. In addition, extensive background research on the curriculum patterns of GUR classes was necessary. Figuring out which SDG fit best into certain GUR categories required critical thinking and important research on what the SDGs and class courses entailed.

## **Methodology**

### Data Collection

The data being used for this project includes qualitative research and data collection. Because the proposed sustainable solution is a curriculum plan, there is little quantitative and numerical data that needs to be recorded outside of potential finances and budgeting. Data was collected through

interviews and surveys. Interviewing stakeholders (ie: Academic Director Marine and Coastal Science, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Western, and more) will give insight on where sustainability already lies in Western's curriculum and the scope of this project in terms of where it stands next to existing curriculums. These stakeholders can also give access to plans currently in the works at Western, and give permission to view budgeting documents if available. Surveys will be used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data from students, with questions ranging from 'how many of their past GUR courses included a sustainability component' to asking the student to write a detailed response of common misconceptions pertaining to sustainability. This survey was specifically designed for Huxley students because these students are likely already immersed in sustainability discourse and have had time to formulate opinions or criticism about sustainability at Western Washington.

The methods mentioned above (interviews and surveys) have been chosen for this specific project because they allow for a better understanding of the attitudes and reactions to such a widespread change. While this project will not have drastic impacts that require a heavy budget, it will enter into the everyday curriculum of students and staff and become almost like a new lens in their toolkit if not already present.

## **Results**

For the interview, Jack Herring, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Western, and Brooke Love, Academic Director of Marine and Coastal Science, were invited to the same meeting so the discussion could be as productive and informative as possible. By having them both present, the interview felt more interactive. In this interview, Jack and Brooke discussed the current curriculum, and how it was going through revisions and modifications a few days before the meeting. Because of this, it became evident that the ship had sailed for implementing any changes for the next couple of months at least. This was disappointing, but Jack was adamant about pursuing this project, that students should be more aware of the power they hold and to push for curriculum change because students deserve an education that is concise and clear on the objectives, rather than the current system Western uses like the GUR checklist. Both individuals also agreed on the importance of widespread sustainability education across Western, not just at Huxley. These tools should not be limited to Huxley students because they have the ability to make a significant impact in most if not all academic departments.

For the surveys, there was an overall consensus with students that sustainability is multifaceted and can thus be a concept incorporated into many topics. Many students touched on the fact that sustainability is intersectional and has the capacity to address social, economic and environmental issues. Students also spoke about the stereotypes that come along with being sustainable, and how these were reinforced by concepts of nature that have negatively impacted minorities and poorer communities. Students were asked if the information they learned regarding sustainability was helpful in their life outside of school (see figure 1), and all answered

yes. This question that is relatively straight forward, shows how these tools learned in Huxley courses, have been helpful to these students outside of their academic career and applicable to real life situations. Because of this, it's essential that all students at Western learn about sustainability and the discourse that surrounds it, so students can access these tools for critical thinking. Even though Huxley students were specifically targeted for this survey because of the assumption of their prior knowledge, there were still about 20% of students who were not aware of the Sustainable Development Goals (see figure 2). This is significant because if 20% of Huxley students are not aware of the SDGs, then it would not be surprising if many students outside of Huxley have not been exposed to these goals at least through Western.

Figure 1:

Looking back, has the information you have learned concerning sustainability been applicable to your life outside of school (shift in your outlook and/ or application as a lens counts).  
5 responses

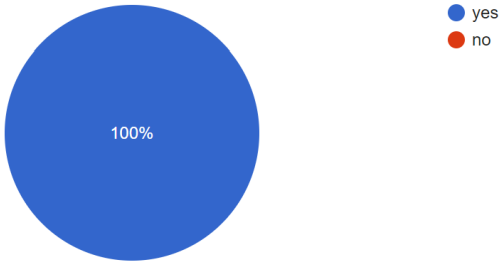
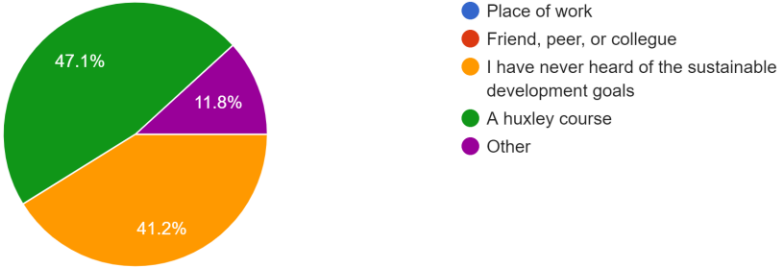


Figure 2:

Have you heard of the United Nations Sustainable Development goals? If so, where did you hear/ learn about them?  
17 responses



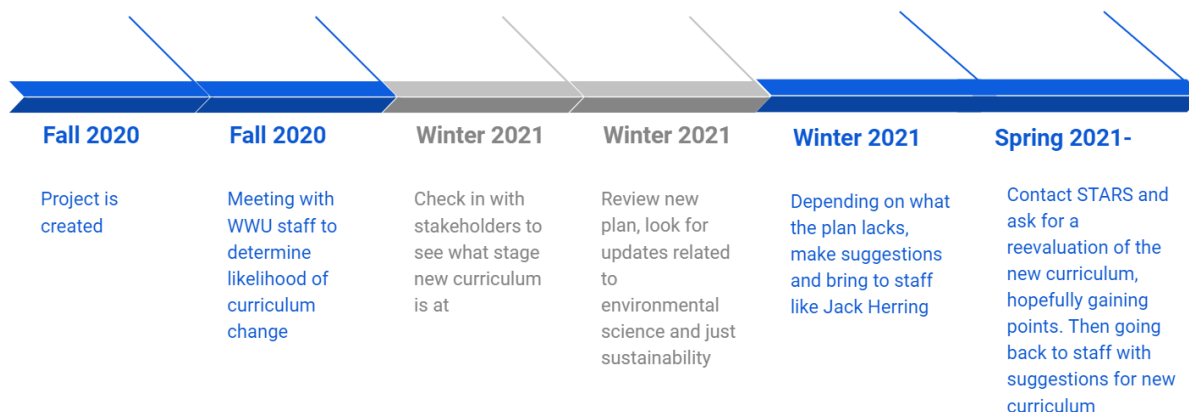
## Recommendations

After the interview with Brooke Love and Jack Herring, modifications in terms of the recommendations and timeline had to be made since the opportunity to actually revise and give feedback on the curriculum was unavailable. The recommendations for this project now include additions to Western's website, specifically a section that explains the SDGs and their significance to Western, and a space for students to provide criticisms, concerns or feedback to the current curriculum system. This would not only demonstrate that Western values and considers sustainable concepts when making drastic decisions, but it also shows that student input is important to the school. Similar to this, a recommendation to raise awareness on the student board is extremely important because not enough student concerns are being presented at the meetings such as the ones where they discuss curriculum change. These recommendations would help inform the school on pressing issues to students, issues which they believe would be beneficial for not only the community at Western to learn about, but by allowing students to access these tools, there are more and more people out in the world taking into account the social, economic, and political aspects pertaining to environmental issues. Lastly, it is recommended that professors are consulted, and asked what they think about the current GUR system. This is critical because professors have specific structures put into place for their courses and any changes made should be brought to them so the communication and intentions are clear, to move forward and give students and professors the best possible learning/teaching experience. For Grace Wang, Department Chair of Environmental Studies at Huxley College of the Environment, a recommendation that would help the project is if she spoke to the curriculum developers to find exactly the new changes they have made, and hope to make in the near future. This would greatly help students see what components and concepts the developers have not yet considered, or if they have, why they were not implemented.

### Extent of Project

This project was originally created to address Western's score on STARS, specifically the curriculum section. By bringing the 17 SDGs of the United Nations to Western, students become not only more aware of the many intersections of sustainability, but it plants a seed which students will take and carry with them, hopefully playing a significant role in the decision making process of their careers. The systems at play here are all of them from economic to social. With GURs already addressing these issues, this new curriculum will overlap it to show how these issues and the factors that pertain to them, demonstrate sustainable qualities or lack thereof. Students will learn how these systems uplift or inhibit sustainability not only in their community, but as discussed in their previous curriculum.

## Timeline



## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The success of this project will be tracked by hearing feedback from the professors on the suggestions that will be given. If they agree to implement the SDGs into the curriculums of their GUR classes, then the project can be considered a success. There must be an understanding, however, that not all professors will be receptive to these sorts of changes to the curriculum and may refuse the suggestions.

## **Budget**

The project is in no need of extra funds as its goal is to simply suggest implementations of SDGs into the GURs to Western professors. These suggestions will likely happen via email and, thus, there will be no need to spend any money. Any data gathered prior to implementation will also be sent out via email which means that no money will be required for that either.

## **Conclusion**



In order to be more focused on looking at what Western Washington University can do about climate change, students must be mindfully educated in a way that inspires them to do more for the planet. Western is a beacon for sustainability and for the environment and the education of our students must reflect that. Implementing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals into Western's General University Requirements is a great start on the journey that all educational institutions must take to ensure that the next generation is ready for the changing climate ahead. It is only with the professors' help that this can become a reality and so it is up to them to lead the next generations in coming up with the solutions to make this world a better place.

## References

United Nations Sustainable Development – 17 Goals to Transform Our World. (n.d.). Retrieved December 06, 2020, from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

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