

Western's Student Sustainability Coalition (WSSC): Whisking up for Climate Action

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12/10/2023

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Executive Summary

At Western Washington University, there is weak community within the sustainability work done on campus. Students ranging from club leaders to employees around sustainability have shared an expressed need and want for a solution to this problem. These groups are distributed throughout campus, as if they're stuck in their own bubbles where they don't get the opportunity to connect with stakeholders or other likeminded individuals to bounce ideas off, receive help to aid a lack of sufficient resources, or feel an aspect of community to guide the work they're doing. There is also a lot of turnover yearly as new students come and others graduate showing a need to catalogue and ensure the resiliency of employee positions and clubs for years to come. Globally, sustainability as a concept strives to stress the importance of community and the expectation of bringing a diverse range of people coming from all different backgrounds and fields of work together to ensure an equitable, and holistic well thought out understanding of any project pursued.

This project aims to solve this issue by offering a space designed to bring Western's sustainability students together on a consistent basis, inviting them to collaborate on projects, communicate needs, and support each other as we move forward to improve Western sustainability. The Sustainability Action plan states under the goal 2.1, when referencing 'Student Life,' to accomplish "through structured community and campus-based co-curricular learning experiences" to "gain knowledge and insight of sustainability in practice." This opportunity will create a continuous relationship for students involved in sustainability to directly aid this objective for years to come as long as the students feel that it is beneficial to their goals and projects.

This project was pursued by three students on campus: Robby Fisher, Megan Strom, and Cole Burk. The sustainability community at Western ranging from transportation, waste, student engagement, and so much more also aided in this effort through focus groups and meetings to ensure that it was approached from an equitable standpoint to ensure that all parties can find this approach beneficial. A couple groups to highlight outside of the Western community includes the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin who both showcased their coalition structures to aid our endeavors to develop our own.

While the coalition will be carried on by some of the original project managers who formed this coalition, action items that are recommended to include are...

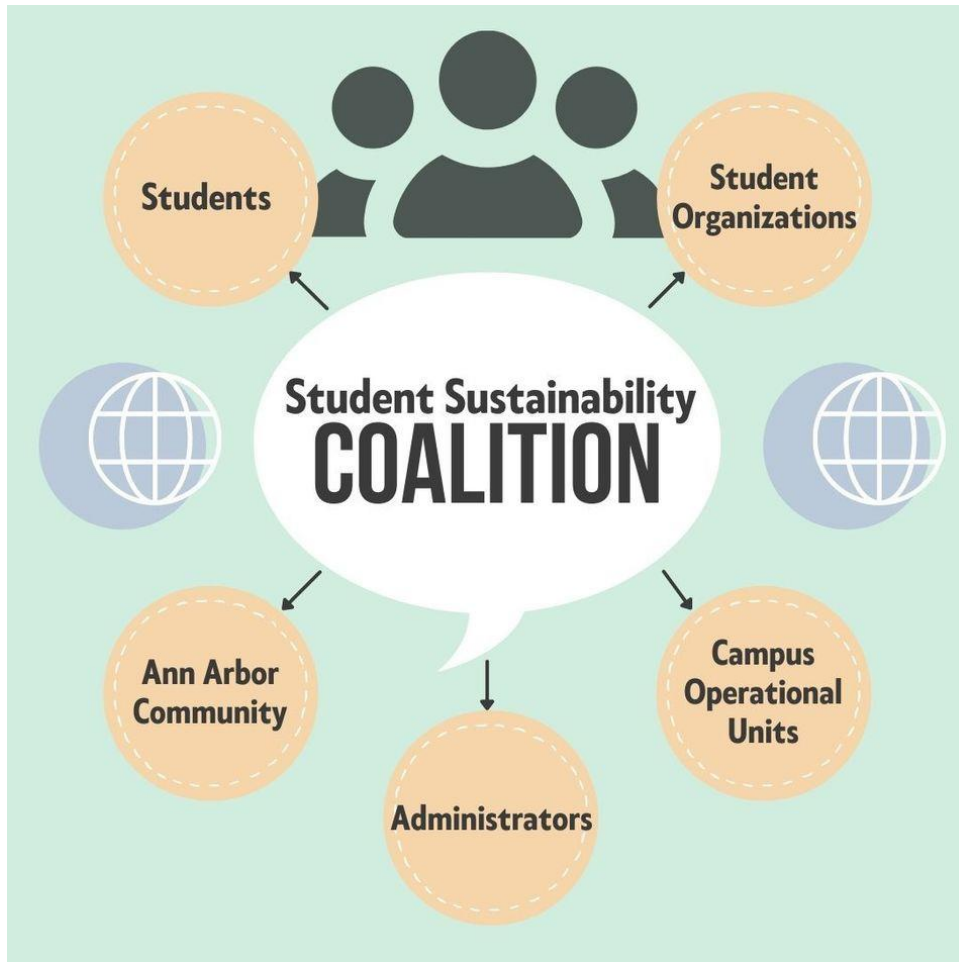
- Offer a hybrid space (remote // in-person) for these meetings to occur.
- Enough time to allow these groups to work on jointed efforts around sustainability.
- Develop a relationship with the President's Sustainability Council to better represent the voices shared in this space.
- Co-facilitation styles that more equitably distribute power when these meetings are led.
- The ability to request support when needed.
- An agenda to discuss larger themes and events on campus.

These recommendations were founded based on advice from the other university coalitions as well as personal wishes structured to aid a more accessible space on campus.

Introduction

Community engagement is an important part of being a community member, being able to have one's voice heard in the hopes of enacting positive change is the ideal for every community in the field of urban planning. Engaging with students to create change on campus is part of the course at any college campus you may find yourself on, but doing so has also become more difficult in recent years. Students now are not just students anymore, they have jobs outside of school and are extremely busy; a study from Georgetown University suggests between 70 and 80% of undergraduate students in the US work while attending school.¹ This makes it extremely difficult to keep pushing for change. In order to combat this issue, our project group believes an appropriate form of action includes the creation of a coalition made up of student employees and club leadership to offer a place at the table to convene for the purpose of discussing ideas, forming work groups to implement more sustainable practices on campus, and share information about resources available to clubs and student employees as our university faces budget cuts. In doing so, we want to tailor our recommendations for the coalition to those who will be participating in it, so to make this possible we are heavily consulting stakeholders like student employees, their supervisors, and club leaders for their input on the working coalition.

¹ Learning while earning: The new normal. CEW Georgetown. (2020, May 7). <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/workinglearners/>



(University of Michigan Student Sustainability Coalition)

The model of a student sustainability our team has been utilizing is one of a format where students from clubs and organizations as well as student employees can come together for the purposes of discussion, collaboration, and sharing of resources to enhance sustainability on campus. Student sustainability coalitions in this format are not a new concept; some have been formed as far back as 2002.² Coalitions such as the one at the University of Michigan or the California Student Sustainability Coalition that brings hundreds of students together from the whole state on an annual basis have been furthering progress on sustainability-related issues for a long time. These organizations and many others like them are able to grant thousands of dollars towards sustainability and climate action projects.³ These coalitions, while serving as successful models of possible frameworks WSSC could utilize, have far more

² [Introduction]. (2008). *Earth Island Journal*, 23(3), 19–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43880086>

³ University of California Office of the President. (n.d.). *Sustainability*. UCOP. <https://www.ucop.edu/sustainability/uc-engagement/index.html>; *SSC Grants*. Planet Blue. (n.d.). <https://planetblue.umich.edu/campus/get-involved/for-students/ssc/grants/>

access to funding than the coalition our group is trying to build does. Though WSSC is not starting out with the same resources or influence as the longer-established coalitions our groups has been researching, the focus right now is to bring people together and get a strong foundation of participation in the coalition going forward.



(PRME UN Sustainable Development Goals: University Committee for Sustainability: Rutgers University 2018)

Our project connects goals 11, 13, and 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which are sustainable communities, climate action, and justice and strong institutions respectively. Our project connects to the goal of sustainable communities because that is effectively what we are trying to create; a community of students interested in sustainability that can outlast the students that participate in it. Through databasing and the creation of a coalition charter, we are hoping that the coalition we create can exist longer than our presence at Western. Our project also connects to goal 13, which is climate action, because we are trying to bring students together to further climate action on Western’s campus. There is strength in numbers and the students that participate in the coalition will be able to lean on each other for support as they continue to work towards implementing sustainable and climate-friendly practices on campus. Lastly, the work we are doing on our project relates to goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals which is peace, justice, and strong institutions because our intentions for the coalition is to promote climate action and equity on campus and advocate for justice.

Lastly, through the American Association of University Professors, we were able to research basic recommendations and history for [building campus coalitions](#), and why they are so important.

Through the creation of Western’s Student Sustainability Coalition (WSSC), like-minded students interested in making a difference in environment-focused efforts on campus can come together to pursue sustainability at Western.

Methodology

The data collection methodology our team is concentrating on includes focus groups which clubs on campus will be invited to via email, as well as interviews to follow up on topics of interest or for parties that could not attend the focus group. Throughout the focus group, we asked questions regarding club interests, opinions/perspectives around sustainability, who should be in this coalition and overall feedback on how to manage and make an enduring coalition. This methodology takes into account all voices that will be involved and produces a space for the coalition to start planting its roots. While the discussion is taking place we had a designated note-taker so that we don't miss out on vital pieces of information. Our team will also hand out sheets of paper for parties to jot down questions or thoughts that they may not feel comfortable sharing in a focus group setting. Our methodology predominantly consisted of pure communication between parties to boost connections and have planted what we are trying to accomplish into the headspace of all clubs we want to be involved in the coalition.

When it comes to our focus group, we have asked student employees and club leaders within sustainability questions to guide our coalition building process as they directly would be involved with the results. With regards to how our project group invited parties to participate in the focus group, our team reached out to as many environmental-related organizations and clubs and student employees that worked in sustainability that were available and asked them to participate in the focus group. The coalition is only able to function at its best when it works for the people in it, so our team has not wanted to make anyone feel like they have to participate if they aren't able or interested, so we used the process of sending out invites to gauge interest in the coalition in general. A big concern our team has been working under during the course of developing the coalition is trying to minimize excess burden on people participating in the coalition. But the focus group had great turnout and representation from many different sustainability-related groups like Students for Climate Action, Furniture Fest, the Outback Farm, and Housing, and many more. This opportunity has allowed us to hear concerns from these group about where they see sustainability working and not working on campus, hopes for how this coalition can benefit all parties involved, and concerns about attempting to center the sustainability community at western. Our team focused on asking neutrally phrased and open-ended questions so as not to accidentally lead our focus group in any direction and let them share their thoughts with us. A list of the questions we asked at our first focus group meeting is located in the appendix of this report (page 10).

In addition to collecting data from Western's campus, we are reaching out to coalitions from other schools around the country to ask them how they facilitate meetings and what their best practices are to inform our recommendations for a student sustainability coalition at Western. The list of questions our project group asked the leaders of other coalitions is also located in the appendix of this report (page 10).

Even though we talked to a multitude of different coalitions with regards to things like the size of the school, budget, and coalition presence, our team still found it valuable to learn about how they run their meetings and generally how their coalitions operate, and we have used the information gleaned from this outreach to inform our recommendations for WSSC.

Results

Our team ended up with two main streams of data collection as stated in the methodology section, the first being a focus group that included club leaders and student employees and the second method consisting of researching other universities' coalitions via email. The focus group provided our team with some starting information to work with as well as an inside view of the thoughts and feelings of stakeholders who will be affected by a student sustainability coalition. There was an obvious expression of the wants and needs of a more connected and efficient network between organizations on campus. As ideas started to bounce around the room there were important suggestions that our team took into account. People indicated a need for a space for club leads and student employees that was centered on sustainability as well as a pool of resources neatly organized so that tackling WWU's budget cuts could be dealt with. This space and access to vital resources would also foster new plans for sustainability projects on campus and create a large, resistant ecosystem of entities. There was also an expressed need for horizontal leadership in all aspects of the coalition as to not have a power dynamic at play.

Our team plans to have started WSSC by winter quarter of 2023. This budding coalition would start off with once per month meetings and groups will be able to either opt in or opt out depending on how useful the coalition is for them. If student employees decide to opt in, they will have a paid position, paid by their supervisor to attend monthly meetings. If club leaders decide to opt in they will have pledge cards that will signify their commitment to being a member of WSSC.

The organization of the coalition's projects will possibly be handled through Microsoft teams so that information regarding past, present and future projects can be traced back to one place. Our team also thought about including a tab on the SEI website that would have information about what the coalition provides, how it works and who is involved.

The University of Michigan was one of the universities we investigated to find more information on how a student sustainability coalition (SSC) is run. Our team had the opportunity to talk to two of the leaders of the coalition at the University of Michigan that broadened our knowledge on SSC's. The University of Michigan's SSC was founded in the early 2000's and has been institutionalized by the University meaning that leadership consists of paid student employees. In 2008, Student Sustainability Initiative (SSI) was created to address small-scale issues faced by students on campus. This transitioned into what is now the U of M SSC which has many student organizations involved (130+), student projects related to social and environmental sustainability, and can be funded by grants. The facilitation style of their coalition was comprised of twelve paid student employees paid by the university. These positions were titled communications team, resource and impacts team, strategy team, and the coalition team. There is also a student carbon neutrality network is a coalition within the larger coalition that advocates for carbon neutrality which the SSC facilitates and engages with outside groups on a regular basis. The two leaders of the U of M Student Sustainability Coalition stressed the importance of being bonded by a common agenda, establishing shared measurements, constant communication and a strong backbone for the groups involved to be supported by. It was also recommended that there is a consistent group that facilitates meetings so that the coalition does not become disorganized and has a set agenda in advance. During meetings U of M incorporated "work streams" which are points during a meeting when everyone breaks into groups to work on databasing, communication, and other important projects to maintain the

coalition. Another permanent position would be somebody who manages the context of the coalition such as how long SSC leadership meets or gathering updates on how each team is doing.

The results that our team has come up with after talking with multiple groups including the two, mentioned in this paper is that the route this coalition needs to take is unique and incorporates the wisdom of other coalitions while respecting the wants and needs of all groups here on Westerns campus.

Recommendations

Our recommendations aim to fill in the gaps that our sustainability community lacks when it comes to the practices and purpose that sustainability aims to fix.

These goals aim to unite systems within sustainability and meet many of the Sustainable Development Goals, mainly “Climate Action” through the work they accomplish, “Reduced Inequalities” as the university faces financial insecurity, and “Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions” as we unite stakeholders that have direct impact on Western’s Institution, local and state government, and the Bellingham Community.

This project, if proven successful, will aim to serve Western and its community for years to come. Aiming to start at the beginning of Winter Quarter 2024, the Western Student Sustainability Coalition will form. The coalition will be under the SEI umbrella to start with and that is who will be responsible for setting the agenda for and facilitating monthly coalition meetings. Facilitation structure is subject to change, but in order to get the coalition going, having little extra responsibility on the participants would remove barriers to entry for students that may want to join. Another recommendation for this continued resiliency is to catalogue the coalition on the Sustainability Engagement Institute website to better communicate with the general student body and ensure the work of stakeholder’s efforts are not lost. The SEI would also be responsible for kicking off the coalition at the start of the year to coordinate these student groups and offer some initial structure guiding introductions, the coalition’s purpose, and discussing values set by the coalition at the end of every year to ensure that the space remains relevant and beneficial to the groups involved for years to come.

Since the core principle of this project is aimed to aid these stakeholders, it was strongly believed to supply a way to instill a sense of commitment to this coalition while also allowing them a chance to disengage if they feel as if this project doesn’t serve them anymore. We are recommending pledge cards to be given out and signed at the beginning of the coalition’s creation requesting that stakeholders who willingly participate show up to the first three meetings before they are offered the chance to more officially opt-in. This was an idea mentioned by us during the focus group which was widely received well.

After they decide to fully opt-in to be a part of the coalition moving forward, based on positive feedback from our focus group, we’re recommending that through pledge cards meant for club leaders and separately supervisors working the coalition into their employees’ job description allowing them to be paid for this work as well, it was our hope that this would ensure consistent attendance throughout the year.

Another recommendation based on the University of Michigan's coalition structure includes the creation of a canvas training course. While the specifics have yet to be determined as we weren't able to receive access to it, our party saw it as a beneficial tool that could help make the transition into the coalition for new people more accessible.

Student schedules are hard to coordinate, so through thoughtful communication, using "when2meet" or other scheduling software, and this prior commitment/incentive of the prior stakeholders involved, there is a hope to overcome these difficulties and make them easier to manage.

At the end of the year, stakeholders will be offered the opportunity to reflect on the last academic year, recognize what seemed to work and what didn't work, breathing a sense of life into the coalition acknowledging the need for flexibility to ensure that the coalition continues to be beneficial for the parties involved. The specifics have yet to be fully developed on how this meeting would exactly play out, but stakeholders from our focus group meeting agreed to this approach as they understood the struggle of dealing with outdated materials that were meant to be helpful, but eventually feel irrelevant as the University continues to develop and evolve. An official meeting to review the coalition's charter for recommended changes should suffice, as long as two thirds of the coalition agrees to the newly made revisions.

Monitoring and Evaluation

To begin with, the coalition will start out with a consistent facilitator for meetings who will also be responsible for setting the agendas prior to each coalition meeting. Eventually, if the coalition sees fit and there are people willing to take on some extra responsibility, there can be a rotational facilitation structure where people can sign up to take turns leading meetings and setting the agenda. This is completely at the coalition's discretion, but potential coalition members were not enthusiastic about a consistent facilitator, so our project group is interested in monitoring how coalition members are feeling about this in particular.

Our project group is also hoping the coalition can eventually host coffee chats on campus where any students who are interested in the coalition can talk to people who are in it and hear about issues the greater student body is interested in tackling. Because we want the coalition to be effective for the entire campus, being able to hear directly from students will better inform the coalition in decision-making. Coffee chats would occur when the coalition both has the budget to provide the coffee, as well as when coalition members have time to organize and host this event.

In order to ensure the coalition functions the way it is intended to and that meetings are facilitated and carried out effectively, our plan is to have a coalition meeting at the end of the year to discuss what worked and what didn't, any changes to the coalition that might need to be made, as well as next steps so the coalition can continue to function in our absence. Our project group is also hoping to discuss the coalition with its participants throughout the year to gauge their interest and opinions on how things are going. Incorporating that feedback into the way the coalition works is going to be integral to making sure it functions in a way that works for the people in it.

Budget

For the coalition, there are two options when determining the budget.

Option A, which will oversee the minimum dollar value needed for the coalition to exist. This option mostly covers the student employees involved in the coalition who will be paid work time through their supervisor for attending and doing work for this committee, which can be represented by roughly $\$17/\text{hr} * \#$ of student employees on the coalition. This cost is on the supervisors of the student employees as the coalition is meant to aid the work assigned to these students, benefitting their work plans and the sustainability community as well. Lastly, the Sustainability Engagement Institute would have to pay their employees who are spending their time working on adding these coalition details to their website, and the employee who would oversee the canvas course creation for students to take, if that recommendation is pursued. Ideally, the room the coalition would meet in could be supplied freely from AS through the VP of Sustainability, SEI, or free room reservations. Events on campus would also hopefully be supplied and worked on through similar methods using past materials where necessary. Procuring new materials for events would ask for aid through the coalition members and their resources.

As for option B, we recommend the pursuit of an SEJF grant to oversee the first two years of the coalition to act as a pilot project and to get it off the ground running without funding concerns. This grant could be small or medium depending on the coalition's opinions before the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

The specifics of the grant haven't been determined yet as it would all have to be confirmed by the coalition as well as brainstormed by them since the grant is meant to fund whatever the coalition views best.



(WWU Flickr, Luke Hollister)

Conclusion

This coalition will act as a driving force for sustainability at Western through the minds of students. The dream is that it will become a network so simpatico that groups on campus will be able to expand their reach and goals using each other as support. Understanding what this coalition means to do will make finding and sharing resources more efficient and will create a space for Western to flourish as a campus known for its sustainability practices. To get to this point there will have to be communication between all groups within sustainability which includes our focus groups, monthly coalition meetings, constant projects in the works, and spaces for groups to meet. WSSC is meant to become a hub for all things sustainable and in time will become a vital cog in the wheel students call WWU.

Appendix

Focus Group Questions

Definitions

- How do you define sustainability here at Western and why is it important to the work you do?
- What areas of sustainability work at WWU are lacking presence or attention?

- To what extent do you personally view western sustainability? (ranging from directly to indirectly)

Coalition

- What does the concept of a coalition mean to you and your work?
- Do you personally feel that a coalition would benefit your club/group/work?
- In what ways more specifically do you see a coalition aiding areas of your work that may be lacking?
- How do you personally wish to see this coalition ran?
- While the goal is to hold monthly meetings, do you see value in subgroups for people that have overlapping interests?
- How do you see more engagement with sustainability at Western through a coalition?
- As a coalition is partially exclusive, how do you see room to ensure others can come to this space or still engage with this space?
- While sustainability is a vast topic, do you see value in having the coalition pursue quarterly goals // themes together to show support for certain issues?

Concerns

- What are your concerns about a coalition being created?
- How can we be effective allies?

Distribution

- How can we make sustainability and the knowledge and resources of our office more accessible for ALL communities on campus?
- What resources and knowledge could you see the student body wanting to know?
- How can we make the intersections of environmental, economic, and social sustainability more visible?
- How can we create welcoming, safe, inclusive, and accessible spaces, events, and programs?
- How can we get more people to show up to our events?

Focus Group Questions

Here is a list of the questions we asked them:

How are your coalition meetings facilitated?

How long and how often does the coalition meet?

How do you plan the agendas for the next meeting?

When it comes to communication, what have you found is most effective in getting the word out to the coalition (emails, social media, etc.)?

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