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Food Systems Mapping and Goals at Western Washington University

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Food Systems Mapping and Goals at Western Washington University

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Western Washington University
Advised by Zoë Plakias
June 14, 2024
Abstract

In this project, I map food systems on the Western Washington University (WWU) campus with the intention of better understanding how different groups are working and collaborating to make food systems more accessible and sustainable on campus. By examining these connections, I also hope to reveal areas for potential future connections to form between groups engaging in similar work. In addition, I provide recommendations for new goals to be added to the existing WWU Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) related to food systems. As most of the goals currently listed in this plan relate directly to Dining Services, this research provides previously missing perspectives from groups on campus doing work related to other areas of the campus food system, particularly related to food insecurity.

Introduction

Written in 2017, Western Washington University’s Sustainability Action Plan was created in response to global warming and climate change. It aims to make the university more sustainable and combines several initiatives that took place on campus to address sustainability issues including the Western Climate Action Plan, a white paper from the Sustainability Academy, and the campus’s Sustainability Tracking and Rating System (STARS) report. The plan was created and devised through numerous public meetings, seminars, and surveys that integrated student, staff, and faculty input.¹

Following a conversation with the Sustainability Engagement Institute (SEI), I decided to focus my research on the food section of the Sustainability Action Plan as staff from SEI had stated that while the plan included a section related to improving the sustainability of Dining Services, it was lacking mention of many of the other groups on campus working to make food systems more sustainable and combat food insecurity on campus. These groups included farms (both on and off-campus), student clubs, and student projects. In addition to this, I wanted to create a systems map to help myself and those working on the SAP to better understand existing and potential connections between groups in the campus’ food systems. It is also my hope that this map can be useful to the groups represented in it as they will be able to get a sense of how their group fits into the system and can identify other groups doing similar work to inform areas for future collaboration.

It is, however, nearly impossible to make changes to one system in isolation without impacting various other campus and community systems that are interconnected. In discussing the social equity factors that influence discussions of food insecurity’s place in campus sustainability discussions, White (2020) discusses how multiple studies in recent years have addressed the sustainability of campus food initiatives without taking a holistic approach to campus

While addressing environmental and economic factors of food systems in sustainability action plans is important, failing to understand how these relate to social factors leaves gaps in university-wide planning that are likely to negatively impact students’ ability to have their basic needs met. White goes on to discuss how higher education institutions with plans to improve the sustainability of their food systems such as The University of California-Berkeley and the University of Maryland take into consideration how having sustainably-produced food available on campus can improve the health and wellbeing of students. However, White notes that the limitation of these initiatives is that they do not include students’ abilities to access this food, especially if the food provided is more expensive than other available options.

In exploring other case studies of barriers that schools had faced when working to tackle issues of food insecurity and sustainable food systems, one of the most cited reasons was budget constraints or a lack of funding. A survey from Deakin University in Geelong, Australia showed that while students and staff valued sustainability as a part of the food system, their priorities more closely aligned with sourcing food that was affordable to them, even if it meant that it was produced less sustainably. Other solutions explored in this case study to make campus food systems more sustainable without students having to purchase more expensive food involved community-based approaches such as encouraging the use of community gardens to grow food and giving students access to facilities to prepare food and a community with whom to explore sustainable food. According to a survey conducted by WWU’s Basic Needs program in the Fall of 2021, 44.7% of students responded that they had faced food insecurity in the month prior to the survey. From my own experiences as a student on campus, awareness of food security as an issue seems to be high among students, staff, and faculty. During my research process and the interviews that I was able to conduct, I have been inspired to see the many efforts to advance solutions to these problems.

On a broader scale, the food systems modeled at WWU reflect some of the challenges faced by food systems around the world. As a result of climate change, the USDA cites potential increases in supply chain disruptions, food prices, and diminished food safety as likely future food systems issues. While these impacts are predicted to vary regionally depending on environmental conditions, global food security as a whole is at risk, and those without the socioeconomic security to seek more expensive substitutes as food choices are altered by these disruptions are likely to face the biggest challenges and hardships.

3 Ibid.
5 Shaw et al.
Methods

Identifying Campus Food System Groups
I used several methods to select groups to contact to better understand the food systems on the WWU campus. First, I reviewed the Western Involvement Network webpage for a list of clubs and noted those that had mentions of sustainability or food systems. After checking to see which student clubs were still active on campus, I reached out to those who had both sustainability and food systems as a part of their written club mission. I also attended an event on campus focused on educating students about food security resources available to them. Through this process, I was able to learn more about work being done on campus to combat food insecurity. This seemed to be an important factor to include in my systems map, and I was able to make note of several more groups on campus doing work related to this topic. I also contacted groups I knew about from my role as a current student and groups recommended by my project advisor and Sustainability Engagement Institute staff.

Interviews and Surveys
After identifying groups to include in the systems map, I narrowed the list to determine which groups to interview. These initial selections were made based on my own judgment of which groups seemed to be most active in food systems work on campus. As I conducted more research and learned about the ways that groups were interacting, I added several groups to my interview list. Some groups that I hoped to interview were unavailable or did not respond. A couple of the groups had also become inactive and were no longer operating on campus so I did not interview them. In total, I identified 36 groups within WWU or closely linked to WWU doing work on campus related to food systems and sustainability and I interviewed representatives from six groups.

A challenge I encountered when creating the systems map was deciding how to limit the scope of the groups included. From my initial list of identified groups, I quickly realized how many groups it was possible to include, as every group on the food systems map had a multitude of connections that would have branched off to include many more groups. Because I wanted to limit the scope of the map to ensure its usability, I did not include every single possible group that was listed in interviews or in my research but rather focused on those playing essential roles in the functioning of food systems on campus. I only included off-campus groups if they had ties and collaborations with at least one on-campus food systems group.

My interview questions were written with the assumption that I would have some background about the group before beginning the interview, obtained either from my initial review of their website or my personal knowledge of the group’s mission and activities. I focused my questions on the goals of the group to help me gain a better understanding of how these might be incorporated into new SAP goals. For student clubs, I also wanted to understand if they had only short-term goals or if they had plans for the future, beyond the graduation date of their present leaders. Frequent turnover within student clubs has been an issue for the completion of long-term
projects and has been a challenge for university staff working to integrate student perspectives in planning.

An important point to note is that I only interviewed one representative from each group. While I requested that the person doing the interview be someone with knowledge regarding the goals and objectives of the group, the views expressed by those interviewed provide only one member’s perspective of the group and may not reflect every activity, goal, or connection present within the group.

Although interviews were the preferred method of data collection, I created an online survey to be sent out to some of the groups that I was unable to interview. The intention of this survey was to reach groups that may not have had the capacity to participate in an interview but were still interested in contributing data to the project. Questions in the survey were similar to those in the interview, with slight modifications made in order to make them work better in a written, rather than verbal, format. While I sent the survey out to five additional groups that I had identified as playing an important role in the campus food system, I did not receive any survey responses as the groups to whom I sent the survey either opted for an interview or did not respond at all.

**Systems Map**

To create the systems map, I assigned each group initially identified as being an important part of the campus food system a color using the online visualization tool Miro. The colors assigned to the groups were significant, with different colors representing different roles that these groups play in the food system and in the university. I connected these shapes with lines to show direct administrative connections (represented by solid arrows) and collaborative programming (represented by dashed lines). Direct administrative connections were defined as groups that operated under a specific department or within an office also shown on the systems map. For example, Dining Services is run by the office of On-Campus Housing, so I showed a solid arrow going from On-Campus Housing to Dining Services. Collaborative programming was defined as existing connections between groups in the form of collaborations on projects.

**Recommendations for New SAP Goals**

To craft my recommendations for new SAP goals, I listed out the goals and challenges that groups had mentioned in their interviews or that I had identified in my research from their websites. From these more specific and group-focused goals and challenges, I looked for overarching themes and identified some areas of need based on what the groups had discussed. From these areas of need, I created a list of broad goals. After meeting with staff from the Sustainability Engagement Institute to discuss some of their processes for writing SAP goals, I drafted recommended goals, rationales for why the goals were important, more focused objectives related to each goal, specific strategies for making progress on the goals, and potential performance indicators that could be used to measure progress on the goals.
Systems Map

Development Process
To construct the systems map, I listed out each of the groups that I had identified as being an important part of the food system using Miro. I used information about direct administrative connections and collaborative programming obtained from interviews, online research, and personal knowledge to show relationships between groups with solid arrows (direct administrative connections) and dashed lines (collaborative programming). Groups were assigned shapes based on whether they were directly a part of WWU (circles) or had close connections to the WWU food system but were not a part of the university (octagon). I assigned actors categories such as “Student Project”, “Student Club”, or “Resource Navigation” based on the main activities of their club and its function in the food system. Initially, I had a central shape labeled “WWU Food Systems” that connected all the groups. However, I later removed this and switched to organizing the groups into major categories as I realized through several conversations that there is not a central entity connecting the entire food system. An early draft of the systems map with this imaginary central actor can be seen below in Figure 1. In my final systems map, I organized groups into categories informed by themes I identified among groups. The categories included: Purchased Food, Student Clubs, Resource Navigation, Food Pantries, Education Programming, and Student Projects. I assigned each group a color to show which category they fit into.

As I conducted the interviews, I refined and added to the connections that I had initially plotted, while adding new groups. It is important to note that the group description is limited to how the group relates to food systems. Many groups listed here do a wide range of work that is not represented in the description of the club in Table 1 or in the systems map. Figure 2 shows the final system map, and Table 1 briefly describes all groups included in the map and denotes the groups whose representatives I interviewed.
Figure 1: An early iteration of the systems map
Figure 2: Final systems map
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description of role in food system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Needs*</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>Provides students with or connects them to basic needs such as financial stability, housing stability, and food security.(^8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellingham Food Bank</td>
<td>Off-Campus Organization</td>
<td>Provides free food in Whatcom County including grocery programs, drive throughs, and home deliveries.(^9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Student Union</td>
<td>Student Club</td>
<td>A club within the Ethnic Student Center that fosters a safe space for marginalized identities and maintains a plot at the Outback.(^10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boldly Grown Farm</td>
<td>Off-Campus Farm</td>
<td>A local farm that some of the Viking Supported Agriculture’s produce is sourced from.(^11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Run through Dining Services, provides large quantities of food to events happening on campus.(^12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Education, Equity, and Diversity (CEED) Pantry</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Located in Miller Hall, provides free food.(^13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Sprouts Farm*</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>An urban vegetable farm within the WWU Center for Community Learning.(^14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining Halls</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Provides food for purchase and an eating space to students on campus.(^15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining Services</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Run through On-Campus Housing, oversees dining halls, markets, and catering on campus.(^16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairhaven College Pantry</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Located in Fairhaven College, provides free food.(^17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Office</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>Provides students with financial assistance, works closely with Basic Needs to provide funding to students with food access needs.(^18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
\(^16\) “Dining at WWU | On-Campus Housing.”
\(^17\) “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Insecurity Network</th>
<th>Student Club</th>
<th>A student club promoting awareness and resources related to food insecurity. 19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Scrap Repurposing for Art</td>
<td>Student Project</td>
<td>Takes food scraps from WHOLE food pantry and turns them into dyes for clothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Security and Policy Minor</td>
<td>Educational Program</td>
<td>A program offered through the College of the Environment examining how food is grown, processed, and distributed. 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grab and Go Markets</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Run through Dining Services, sells students food on campus through small markets. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism Pantry</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Located in the Communications Facility, provides free food. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning, Environment, Action, Discovery (LEAD)</td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>An environmental restoration program run by graduate students through the College of the Environment. 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftover Alert System*</td>
<td>Student Project</td>
<td>A project conducting research and making recommendations for a system to distribute extra food from catering and events on campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics Pantry</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Located in Bond Hall, provides free food. 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American Student Union</td>
<td>Student Club</td>
<td>A club within the Ethnic Student Center providing Native students with support and resources, maintains a plot at the Outback Farm. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Campus Housing</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Coordinates and runs housing and dining services on campus. 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Council</td>
<td>Off-Campus Organization</td>
<td>A community action agency providing service, investment, and collaboration to build more just and equitable communities. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outback Farm*</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>A 5-acre farm located on WWU’s campus providing work and learning opportunities for students and the community. 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks Hall Pantry</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Located in Parks Hall, provides free food. 29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 “Dining at WWU | On-Campus Housing.”
22 “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
24 “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
26 “Dining at WWU | On-Campus Housing.”
29 “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Puget Sound Food Hub                            | Off-Campus Organization | A farmer-run cooperative aggregating and distributing locally grown food in the Puget Sound Region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociology Pantry</th>
<th>Food Pantry</th>
<th>Located in Arntzen Hall, provides free food.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students for Climate Action*</td>
<td>Student Club</td>
<td>A club giving students an opportunity to advocate for causes supporting the fight against climate change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability Engagement Institute</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>A WWU office that provides educational opportunities and progresses goals in Sustainability Action Plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiny Farm*</td>
<td>Student Project</td>
<td>A student project located at City Sprouts farm providing free CSA boxes to the WWU community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor’s Row</td>
<td>Campus Service</td>
<td>Located outside of the Viking Union, local food vendors providing food for purchase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viking Supported Agriculture</td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>A WWU program that connects the WWU community to local farms through the provision of CSA boxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viva Farms</td>
<td>Off-Campus Farm</td>
<td>An off-campus farm that provides bilingual training related to holistic farming in addition to land and capital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Success Scholars</td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>A WWU program providing support to students who have experienced homelessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Worn Closet</td>
<td>Student Project</td>
<td>A free community closet located at WWU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Hub of Living Essentials (WHOLE) Pantry*</td>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>A resource located in the Viking Union, provides free food and toiletries to WWU students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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31 “Basic Needs | Office of Student Life | Western Washington University.”
| Zero Waste Western | Program | A program through the AS Recycle Center to provide waste-sorting education and reduce waste.\(^\text{40}\) |

Goals for SAP

Group-Specific Goals
In the interviews, I asked group representatives for their current goals along with any goals they had for one or five years in the future. Goals that I learned about in this stage of the process included:

- Feed as many students as possible
- Work on setting up a larger volunteer system to meet programming needs
- Spread awareness of food insecurity on campus
- Make food access resources more readily known and available to students
- Meet the curiosity and enthusiasm of students through programming and providing a learning space for regenerative agriculture education
- Provide students with a better understanding of year-round farming and all of the operations that go along with it
- Increase knowledge of funding and grants related to food systems work
- Provide free CSA boxes to WWU students, funded for three years
- Provide food to the WWU community through Earth Week free produce tables
- Continue to partner with local farms to bring more free produce to campus
- Develop strategies to address food insecurity without relying completely on grants
- Combat stigma around being food insecure or accessing food pantries
- Connect students who are food insecure to food resources both on-campus and off-campus
- Increase student volunteer engagement, especially through the winter months
- Increase student opportunities to do research on agriculture, food systems, or related topics
- Maintain a consistent number of volunteers
- Establish long-term funding for student farm crew
- Ensure that student leadership turnover does not impact the continuation of club projects
- Increase student awareness of SNAP benefits and if they meet qualifications
- Address student needs as a community—have a way for organizations to talk to each other to accomplish similar goals
- Provide food grown by students for students
- Expand programming options and educational offerings, including being able to bring in more guest speakers
- Adapt farm operations to account for climate change and hotter, drier summers
- Appoint a full-time staff person to create institutional continuity as students cycle through to collect data and have it in one place
- Reduce food waste at on-campus events through an alert system, specifically through catering events
- Decrease food insecurity for students

I also inquired about the challenges that groups were facing in meeting their goals or conducting their group activities. For several of the groups interviewed, asking this brought up new ideas for
goals that the groups might have, even if they had not listed them explicitly as a goal. Challenges mentioned included:

- Lack of labor resulting in limited capacity to operate
- Lack of secure land tenure
- Worries about development on land compromising farming
- Lack of cohesion within environmental clubs on campus
- Students trying to do a lot of the same work without realizing others are working towards similar goals
- Lack of communication avenues for students to collaborate with dining services
- High rates of turnover among student employees
- Challenges in consistently maintaining metrics in the same place to measure change over time
- Limited staff capacity to run programming while fulfilling other university-related obligations
- Cuts to funding
- Lack of continuity among different universities doing similar food systems work

**Development of Themes**

To begin crafting new SAP goals, I combined the goals mentioned by interviewees into a single list. To organize these goals, I split them into short and long-term goals, based on what I had heard in my interviews.

From this exercise, I was able to identify some themes across groups. One major challenge I identified was a lack of communication between groups, as interviewees mentioned working on projects with similar goals but did not mention working with other groups I had researched or interviewed that I knew were doing similar work. The groups I interviewed also expressed interest in collaborating with more groups. A concern expressed specifically by student interviewees was the inaccessibility of staff from on-campus groups working on food systems issues such as Dining Services. While this seemed to be mostly caused by staffing challenges and turnover, this lack of communication and collaboration hindered student efforts to advance projects related to addressing food insecurity on campus. From these observations, I identified a theme of “creating better avenues for communication between groups working on food systems issues”.

Another challenge that I identified from my interviews was programming limitations, often due to staffing shortages or budget constraints. Many groups talked about having the student interest and engagement to justify the creation of more programming but cited a lack of resources to carry this out. From this observation, I identified a theme of “increasing programming capacity of groups working to address food insecurity on campus”.

Several groups mentioned a need for more awareness about food insecurity issues on campus. This included better advertising of how to identify if you are an individual who is food insecure, on-campus resources available to students (such as food pantries), how to navigate resources that
are available for students off-campus (such as SNAP benefits), and reducing the stigma associated with food insecurity and accessing resources. From these concerns, I identified a theme of “improving advertising to spread awareness of food insecurity resources on campus”.

In my interviews, an area of difficulty that was identified among student clubs was frequent club member and leader turnover as a result of students graduating and leaving groups. While this is a normal, unavoidable occurrence given the structure of a higher education institution with student leadership, it still presents difficulties for organizational continuity. Projects started by one group of students may not be carried forward by those who take over their positions at a later time due to differences in interests, changes in resources, or a lack of information left behind by previous leadership. This can also lead to groups having very similar goals but not knowing that other groups are working towards the same goals. Frequent student turnover also made it difficult to know the best contact for a group when trying to get in touch with them. When reaching out to inquire about interviews, I was redirected in several cases to a person better suited to speak to the goals of the group, but it is highly likely that some of the groups I was not able to reach did not have an updated list of officers from the Associated Students (AS)’s Western Involvement Network website making it difficult to contact them. From these observations, I identified a theme of “decreasing inefficiencies and overlaps caused by student turnover”.

**Goal Development**

To develop recommendations for new SAP goals, I used the goals already written in the WWU Sustainability Action Plan as a reference for structure and language. Although these goals have many components to them including objectives, rationales, strategies, affected areas, alignments, and STARS credits, upon consulting with staff at the Sustainability Engagement Institute, I opted to focus on writing goals, objectives, strategies, and performance indicators that would reflect a more comprehensive view of the food system on campus than is currently written into the plan.

From the overarching themes I identified, I came away with two goals—one related to coordination between groups and one focusing on communication from groups to others. Modeling the way that I wrote the goals after the format of the goals already published in the SAP, I included bigger, overarching goals along with a rationale for why the goal mattered in a broader context, more focused objectives for each goal, and strategies that showed specific actions that could be taken to work towards the goals. I also included a list of performance indicators based on the list of metrics of success groups shared in their interviews.

My final goals are as follows:

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**Goal 1**: Create better avenues of communication for groups working on food systems issues to facilitate more efficient and effective coordination of activities and resources.

**Rationale**: Facilitating coordination between groups working on food system issues can give students opportunities to learn more about sustainable food systems and better advance goals related to sustainable food systems on campus.
Objective: Develop and implement a communication structure between campus groups and Dining Services.

Objective: Decrease inefficiencies and overlap between groups caused by student turnover through the establishment of permanent staff positions.
  ▪ Strategy: Create a central coordinator staff position for food systems on campus.
  ▪ Strategy: Establish permanent staff positions for key non-club groups such as the Outback, the Leftover Alert System, and the WHOLE food pantry.

Goal 2: Improve food sustainability and food security outreach to the campus community.

Rationale: Providing students with the knowledge of how to access food resources on campus to ensure that they have their basic needs covered is an important part of a sustainable campus community.

Objective: Increase the programming capacity of groups working to address food systems sustainability on campus through the provision of workshops, guest speakers, and opportunities to engage in research related to regenerative agriculture and food systems.
  ▪ Strategy: Establish long-term funding for groups such as the Outback and City Sprouts to provide opportunities for students to engage in food systems work and regenerative agriculture.

Objective: Improve advertising and methods for spreading awareness of food insecurity resources on campus.
  ▪ Strategy: Maintain relationships with local farms to bring free or accessibly-priced produce to campus food pantries or through tabling in Red Square.
  ▪ Strategy: Establish a leftover alert system for extra food from catered events.

Potential performance indicators:
  • Number of students engaging in projects or research related to sustainable food systems.
  • Door counter results from the WHOLE food pantry to track usage.
  • Number of volunteers at food pantries.
  • Number of club members from clubs engaging in sustainable food systems work.
  • Amount of food stocked by food pantries on campus.
  • Amount of food grown by Outback farm and City Sprouts farm.
  • Number of students using leftover alert system
  • Pounds of food distributed through leftover alert system.
Additional Observations

Timeline Differences
There was a noticeable difference between the timelines of staff working on the Sustainability Action Plan, staff in food-systems-related positions across campus, and students. While the Sustainability Action Plan goals project out five or ten years into the future, students are often graduating in around four years. Additionally, students are unlikely to be involved in the same group for their entire four years on campus, making it difficult to carry out long-term projects and goals within student groups. Items like legacy documents and club constitutions that state the goals of the group can exist in some cases in an effort to provide some continuity in the projects of the club, but a common characteristic of student groups is that the students currently involved in them have a chance to pursue projects that fit their current interests and the current needs of the school. The advantage of this student club model is that it gives students the flexibility to explore issues that matter to them but it presents challenges for integrating club goals into the Sustainability Action Plan. Of the three groups that I researched and interviewed that were student clubs, two did not have established goals for five or more years in the future. In contrast, staff whom I talked to in longer-term positions were able to provide clearly defined goals that extended multiple years into the future.

Limitations of Systems Mapping Model
It was also difficult to limit the systems map to food systems only. Many of the groups I researched and interviewed participated in work in multiple areas of the university, not just food systems. While this was something that I had expected, it made it challenging to figure out how to construct the systems map. I wanted to make it as comprehensive as I could while keeping it focused on food systems and making it a helpful resource for those wishing to better understand the food system at WWU. However, I wanted to capture the multitude of ways in which the food system is connected to other essential resources on campus. For example, considering that food access is a basic need, I wanted to include the importance of institutions such as the Financial Aid Office to show that food system sustainability can be linked to many facets of campus operations. Ultimately, the goal was to capture some of the major collaborations happening between groups and provide a baseline to highlight future opportunities for connection and collaboration between groups.

Role of Celebrating Accomplishments
One of my favorite questions to ask in the interview process was that of recent accomplishments that the group was proud of. Although most of the questions I had focused largely on goals and challenges at the school that the group was working to address, every person that I interviewed was very excited to talk about the progress that they had made on their goals which I felt was an important aspect to highlight when examining how improvements can be made to food systems at the university. Giving these organizations a space to celebrate the hard work they have put in in addition to seeking ways to improve their effectiveness is critical and I have included a list of several notable accomplishments shared with me from interviews below:
• Expansion of volunteer system at WHOLE food pantry
• Improvement of the allergen section of the WHOLE food pantry (including options for gluten-free, vegan, and vegetarian food)
• Sustainability, Equity, and Justice Fund grant allowing for students to have paid positions at City Sprouts Farm
• Implementation of a program to distribute free CSA boxes to Western students from the Tiny Farm
• Earth Week free produce table put on by Students for Climate Action
• Addition of two student staff positions at Basic Needs for Fall 2024 to help with outreach and programming
• Transition from the Basic Needs Office to the Basic Needs Hub, which allows for greater sharing of resources
• Continued collaborations of Outback with a multitude of student clubs and academic departments with the intention of establishing even more
• Student research opportunities at the Outback, including participating in dry land farming research
• Recommending a solution for the recovery of catered food through the leftover alert system

Role of Leadership
This process involved both an observation of group leaders and how they worked to organize their groups in order to make progress on goals and some personal leadership growth as I worked to better understand pieces of a complex system. In defining the role of a leader, Kotter (2001) writes how “leaders gather a broad range of data and look for patterns, relationships, and linkages that help explain things41”. In creating the systems map, I gathered data from multiple sources and created a reference of connections between groups in the food system. Although there was no single group overseeing the entire food system, exploring the existing and potential relationships between the groups that were working on these issues fits Kotter’s definition of leadership. While my research was not focused on explaining the entire system, finding ways to articulate the complex needs of many groups and distill them into several tangible goals demonstrates leadership. Through stakeholder engagement and communication, I worked to better understand how these groups operated, and I found it fascinating to explore the ways that individual leaders within the groups themselves communicated and set goals for their groups.

An important aspect of creating the goals that involved leadership was also the recognition that the system was constantly evolving and changing as students and other leaders moved in and out of it or changed roles. Because many students were only at the school for four years and did not stay in the same group for the entire time that they were students, the turnover of leadership and goal-setters within groups was high. This was something that I considered when working to create the goal recommendations for the Sustainability Action Plan and I looked to find a balance between goals that were specific enough to take action on and create objectives around while

keeping in mind that the goals would need to be adaptable to fit the changing needs of the system.

Conclusion

Campus food systems present many challenges to long-term goal-setting due to their complexity and the multitude of groups that they involve. Creating goals that take these complexities into account is an important part of making sure that plans to address the sustainability of food systems on campus include the wide range of groups working on these issues in addition to considering the environmental, financial, and social aspects of food systems. Although goals must be created with enough specificity to be acted upon in a tangible, measurable way, it is also important to give them the flexibility to be changed as students transition in and out of the university and our understanding of the needs of the campus food system evolves. In its current state, two of the biggest areas for growth in the food system at WWU relate to communication between groups working to advance food systems issues and address food insecurity and better communication of resources from groups performing this work to ensure that it reaches the broader campus community.

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Works Cited


Appendix

Interview Questions

- What are the activities of your organization?
- What are the current goals for your organization?
- What are some of the goals of your organization that you would like to accomplish in the next year and in the next five years?
- How does your organization plan to measure progress made towards these goals?
- What challenges has your organization faced in trying to meet these goals?
- What are some of your recent achievements as an organization that you are proud of?
- Have you had any collaboration with any other groups on campus working on issues related to food systems? Do you have any plans to do this in the future?
- Is there anything else relevant to this topic that you would like to share?

Organizations Interviewed and interviewee positions within organizations

- Basic Needs Office: WWU Staff Member
- City Sprouts Farm: WWU Staff Member
- Leftover Alert System: Student Project Leaders
- Outback Farm: Student Employee
- Students for Climate Action: Student Club Leader
- Tiny Farm: Student Project Leader
- WHOLE Food Pantry: Student Employee