

## **The Outback OELP Restructuring Proposal**

To: The Associated Students Board of Directors

From: Roby Ventres-Pake, AS Outback OELP Coordinator

January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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### **1. Summary of the Outback OELP**

The Outback Outdoor Experiential Learning Program (Outback OELP) is a 5-acre, student-run experiential learning site located on the south end of the Western Washington University Campus. The OELP is focused on providing educational programming, producing food sustainably, and offering agricultural work experience for all WWU students. The Outback Farm is a place for organic agriculture, community gardening, native ecosystem restoration, concerts and live performances, workshops, volunteering, teambuilding, enjoyment of natural space, and much more. It also serves as an outdoor learning lab for academic courses through Fairhaven College, Huxley College, and the Biology Department, as well as for the Child Development Center.

The Outback has a rich history, from the early 1920's when it was homesteaded by June and Farrar Burns, to the 1970's when WWU students started cultivating the land, to its present day recognition as an especially valuable campus resource. Currently, thanks to the hard work of many people and recent increases in institutional support, the farm is more organized than ever before. The Outback now consists of 5 themed gardens and 42 community garden plots, and the program is serving large numbers of the WWU student body. Total fall quarter 2011 attendance through events and workshops was recorded at 432. Attendance at Sunday work parties, LEAD work parties, Biology 101 volunteer events, and through other volunteer opportunities was recorded at 511. Also, there were at least 61 students involved with the Outback on a recurring basis as a part of WWU academic courses. These numbers do not include unrecorded attendance during Tuesday and Thursday work times every week during the quarter, biweekly Outback governing council meetings, frequent Child Development Center use of the Outback, and

countless hours of service put in on individual time by work-study employees, Americorps Students in Service participants, and our most dedicated volunteers.

The Associated Students (AS) and Fairhaven College jointly support the OELP. The AS provides two year-round, paid student coordinators, program advising, institutional support, and an annual operating budget of \$2,750. Fairhaven College provides ten work-study employment positions from late September to early June each year, a faculty advisor, academic connections, institutional support, and an annual operating budget of \$5,000. Both institutions have historically contributed significantly to large infrastructural improvements such as the construction and maintenance of the outdoor classroom, amphitheater, greenhouse, and raised community garden beds.

## 2. Statement of Need

Though the Outback OELP already provides many tangible benefits to WWU, it still faces many challenges. It is critical that we address the following issues:

- a. **The farm is crippled by the expectation that it must operate on the academic-year calendar.** This manifests itself through serious summer labor shortages and an awkward transition season for new student coordinators. Currently the Outback is set to hire new coordinators to begin mid-June, the absolute busiest time of the agricultural season.
- b. **The Outback lacks an organized food production program.** As an educational farm, we want to model what true farms must focus on—productivity. The OELP strives to teach a new generation of educated farmers and consumers, but without a food production program we cannot offer a realistic demonstration of sustainable agriculture. Also, the farm already produces large volumes of produce and has no reliable way to distribute it to the community.
- c. **An excessive burden is placed on student coordinators to manage the OELP.** For years, the Outback has survived through student passion, and we need more equitable ways to disperse responsibility. Currently and historically, the AS student coordinators have needed to work through breaks and well over their required hours to maintain the farm and provide sufficient programming.

In light of university financial struggles, the Outback has been asked to demonstrate its ability to organize and serve WWU with little additional funding. The following proposed changes will significantly increase the functioning ability of the Outback OELP with a minimal financial investment.

## 3. Proposed Changes

In the interest of the long-term success of the Outback OELP, I am making the following proposals for the consideration of the AS Board of Directors:

**a. Transition term of AS Outback Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator to the calendar year (winter quarter through fall quarter).**

This is a crucial change to ensure that the agricultural operations of the Outback Farm are well managed throughout the growing season. In a position that requires a huge amount of background knowledge and prior experience, it is difficult enough just to make an annual transition of coordinators. To transition coordinators in the height of the growing season (at the end of spring quarter) severely hinders the farm's ability to produce food and provide for the community.

If this proposal is approved, the coordinator and assistant coordinator positions will be hired for a 2 quarter commitment at the end of the current term, and from then on Outback hiring will take place in fall quarter each year for a start date at the beginning of winter quarter. The next full year term offered would be January through December 2013.

**b. Establish an Outback Summer Apprenticeship Program.**

The Outback Farm currently faces recurring summer labor shortages. Summer is the busiest time on the farm, but volunteers are scarce and there is no work-study crew. Full responsibility to care for the animals, crops, and 5-acre space falls onto the two AS Outback employees. To remedy this, I propose the creation of the Outback Summer Apprenticeship Program, which would hire two additional employees for a part-time commitment of 180 hours each over the approximately 15 weeks between the end of spring quarter and the beginning of fall quarter (15 hours/week for 12 weeks, with the opportunity for 3 weeks of vacation). The Summer Apprenticeship Program would provide meaningful WWU student employment opportunities that would include hands-on training in sustainable agriculture and Outback program management, which could serve to train future coordinators of the Outback. It would also allow for the success of improved summer programming (see item c) and would alleviate some of the excessive summer burden on the AS Outback Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator. In providing "job-related skill building and community networking opportunities for students" this change is also in line with the Outback Mission Statement as approved in the 2010 Outback Program TAP Report.

Assuming a summer commitment of 180 hours, pay of \$9.50/hr, and additional Social Security/Medicare Charges of 7.65%, this would come at a cost of \$3,681.63. If this proposal is approved, the AS will create a new Outback budget in this amount (plus a 10% contingency) solely for the hiring of these employees in 2012. This money would come from the Combined Fund Balance (budget code ASBACB), which has a current balance of at least \$20,000. The Outback staff would collaborate with program and faculty advisors in the AS and Fairhaven to create a formal

job description for the Summer Apprenticeship Program, and hiring would take place in spring quarter 2012. During budget evaluations in spring of 2012, the AS will have the opportunity to make this amount an annual budget increase to sustain the Summer Apprenticeship Program.

**c. Institute an organized food production program at the Outback Farm.**

The Outback OELP, though focused on educating WWU students on sustainable agriculture, lacks a successful demonstration of an agricultural production system. Implementing an organized food production program at the Outback Farm would focus the energy of the work-study and volunteer crews on the farm, provide more applicable educational opportunities for WWU students, increase visibility of the AS and the Outback Farm across campus, and supply fresh, local produce to the community. There is currently an opportunity for the Outback Farm to become a dedicated supplier for the Bellingham Food Bank. This would be an excellent way to realize the goals of an Outback production program.

The Bellingham Food Bank is Whatcom County's largest emergency food provider and each year serves 15% of all families that live in Bellingham city limits. Max Morange, the food bank's agricultural programs coordinator, has indicated that there is a significant need for more fresh produce and expressed a desire to work with the Outback Farm. By supplying food for this need, the Outback could both improve its programming for students and give back to the community in a way that would reflect well on the farm, the Associated Students, and Western Washington University. The Outback would receive plant starts, seeds, and crop guidance from the Bellingham Food Bank, would create a donation schedule to fit the needs of the food bank, and would keep track of donations throughout the growing season to demonstrate the success of the program.

To reliably implement this program the Outback needs to expand its cultivated area and find a reliable source of summer labor. We are now working with Fairhaven College to obtain permission to cultivate the Outback's south field, which would provide necessary growing space for new agricultural programs. Item b of this proposal addresses the need for summer labor, which is crucial regardless of an increase in agricultural output.

If this proposal is approved, the AS offers its support to the Outback OELP to pursue the Food Bank donation program beginning in 2012. The approval of this item reflects the understanding between the AS and the Outback OELP that organized agricultural production is a crucial piece in the enhancement of the Outback program.

**d. Acknowledge the need for a permanent, full-time Outback OELP Coordinator position.**

In light of excessive burdens on student coordinators, periodic labor shortages, and lack of long-term coordinator continuity, it is clear that a program as complex as the Outback would be best managed by an experienced, fairly-compensated, full-time, non-student employee (as is the case locally at The Evergreen State College, The University of British Columbia, and Washington State University, among others). A full-time coordinator would provide better organization for the farm operations, better facilitate the work-study program and volunteer crews, enable more academic connections, improve educational programming, and consistently maintain the OELP on a long-term basis. Ideally, this employee would hold a faculty position and could develop accredited academic programming for the farm. The intention of creating this position is not to take the Outback out of the hands of students. Rather, a full-time coordinator would help WWU students maximize their personal growth and education from the farm.

Since the AS student coordinator position was created in 2006 a handful of devoted students have consistently worked in extreme excess of their paid hours to maintain the functioning of the Outback OELP. This speaks to the love and care that many feel for the Outback, but is not a sustainable way to continue caring for the space indefinitely. I am asking the AS Board of Directors to acknowledge this need for a full-time coordinator as a priority to be dealt with by both the AS and Fairhaven College as soon as finances permit. In approving this proposal, the AS is also helping carry forward proposals made in the 2010 Outback Program TAP Report.

**Motion 1: Approve Section 3, Item a.** This would transition the AS Outback Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator to the calendar year beginning January 2013.

**Motion 2: Approve Section 3, Item b.** This would provide approximately \$3,681.63 this year to the Outback OELP for the establishment of the Summer Apprenticeship Program in 2012.

**Motion 3: Approve Section 3, Item c.** This would offer AS approval for the expansion of cultivated area to the Outback's South Field and institution of a Bellingham Food Bank donation program in 2012.

**Motion 4: Approve Section 3, Item d.** This would acknowledge the need for a permanent, full-time Outback Coordinator position.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Roby Ventres-Pake  
AS Outback OELP Coordinator