WOOT! PROGRAM REPORT

A Proposal to Institutionalize the Western Outdoor Orientation Trip Program

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## Table of Contents

- Executive Summary ................................................................. P. 3
- National Research on Outdoor Orientation Programs .......................... P. 4
- Qualitative & Quantitative Data on WOOT ....................................... P. 5
- Retention & Academic Performance ............................................. P. 10
- Admissions & Recruitment ....................................................... P. 11
- WOOT! 2013 Programming Timeline ............................................ P. 12
- How the WOOT! Program aligns with the Division of ESS .................... P. 13
- Using a Curricular Approach to Outdoor Experiential Education ............. P. 14
- Strategic Vision ........................................................................ P. 15
- Recommendations ...................................................................... P. 17
- Conclusion ................................................................................ P. 21
EXEcutive Summary

Western’s Outdoor Orientation Trips (WOOT!) Program is an outdoor adventure-based orientation program designed to provide incoming freshmen with an incredible opportunity to enhance their transition into Western; personally, socially, academically and environmentally. For the past three years Western’s Outdoor Orientation Trips Program has provided incoming freshmen with a unique experience to connect to upperclassmen, fellow peers, Western and the greater Bellingham community through week-long wilderness trips.

Using an experiential education approach to outdoor adventure programming, WOOT! creates a dynamic learning experience for incoming students to develop self-confidence, leadership skills, a strong sense of community while reflecting on their purpose for attending higher education and building meaningful relationships with their peers.

This annual outdoor orientation program occurs the week prior to regular move-in for new students. The trips are led by well-trained and involved upper-class students who serve as role models, outdoor guides, facilitators and mentors for incoming students.

Feedback from participants and parents has consistently demonstrated the profound impact that this trip has on their overall transition to Western, has helped students decrease their anxiety about college expectations and has increased their desire to be an active participant in their education.

“After going on WOOT! I feel more connected, more prepared and more ready to begin college. I know that Western is the right place for me.”
- 2011 WOOT! Participant

Overall, WOOT! is an impactful transitional experience which involves adventure-based programming, leadership development, community living, teambuilding, environmental knowledge and multi-cultural awareness. As we continue to find ways to have Western stand out in the state of Washington and across the country, this is a program that can recruit and retain an engaged student body dedicated to sustainability and personal growth.

The goal is that WOOT! becomes a permanent program at Western in order to continue offering first-year students a transformative outdoor experience which builds a strong connection to the environment, themselves, others and Western.
There are over 200 outdoor orientation programs in higher education currently operating in the United States (Bell, 2010) – which is about 11% of the nation’s four-year residential colleges and universities.

“Traditional college orientations have often focused on introducing students to the institution (policies, registration, campus layout), but they have neglected the social connections between students, which is often students’ greatest concern (Bell & Williams, 2006).

Research shows that outdoor orientation programs can increase retention rates of first-year students; help first-year students to grow personally, socially and spiritually; and increase friendship formation among this population (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Devlin, 1996; Galloway, 2000).

The goal of many outdoor orientation programs is assisting students with their transition to college (Bell, Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008). Other documented gains associated with these programs include personal growth, an increase in self-efficacy and improved retention. Further research demonstrates that these programs positively affect students’ social skills, such as the development of social groups, teamwork and reducing stereotypes.

Much of this research challenges colleges and universities to consider offering outdoor orientation programs as an opportunity to improve retention rates and foster the development of community among incoming students (Austin, Martin, Mittelstaedt, Schanning & Ogle, 2009).

“In the most rigorous and controlled study done to date, Gass (1986, 1987, 1990) found that participation in a wilderness orientation program at the University of New Hampshire produced higher retention rates, higher grade averages, and positive changes in specific student development behaviors as compared with peers in another optional active orientation program as well as with peers that participated in only the required orientation program centering around class scheduling and familiarity with the campus” (Association for Experiential Education, 2011).
QUALITATIVE & QUANTITATIVE DATA ON WOOT!

This data has been gathered from students who have participated in the WOOT! program. This information was collected through a post-evaluation survey regarding their experience on the trip. Quotes are representative of students' experiences in relation to the outcomes we hope to achieve through this program.

![Chart]

“I have increased my confidence and sense of self.”

“Before the trip I was honestly freaking out about school starting. As an out of state student I was really nervous about being so far away from home and not knowing anyone here. While on the WOOT trip, however, my fears were basically quelled and rather than fighting all the change occurring in my life right now I feel much more ready to go along with and embrace it all. The people I met during WOOT have so positively impacted my freshman year, and I became much more confident in myself and who I am-- and that is incredibly valuable.” – WOOT! Participant

“My experience was enlightening. I learned a lot about my new home, and even more about myself. As a result, I came into my freshman year much more confident and comfortable with myself than I would have been otherwise, already with a closely-knit group of friends. I am looking forward to continuing my involvement with WOOT!, as I am really unwilling to put the experience behind me. I want to share this fantastic experience with as many people as possible, and so am really excited to have a chance to help the program grow!”

- Amber Michaelis (WOOT! Participant)
“This trip was by far one of the best experiences of my life. Being nervous prior to the trip was to be expected while immediately becoming friends with everyone in the group was not. A sense of camaraderie was built up right away and will remain with this group of people for years to come. This lasting bond is definitely one of the things I was looking for when I signed up for this trip and it surpassed my wildest dreams. This trip is something that every freshman should be involved in. It helped me get over my anxiety of starting college, helped me make some great friends, and allowed me to enjoy the beauty of the outdoors. There is little to improve on a trip like this and I think only time can make it better.” - Mindon Win (WOOT! Participant)

“This week is very possibly one of the best weeks of my life. Not only did I learn about nature, Western, and Bellingham, but I learned about myself. The thing that I will remember most about this trip is our appreciation circle. The things that people said to each other were so real and heartfelt. It amazed me how we knew each other well enough to give the compliments that we did. I believe that a large part of this bond was due to our leaders. The word leader does not seem to fit in this situation. I think that companion, mentor, and friend fit better. To Katy, Max, and Marli – thank you. I will never forget what you have given me.” - Courtney Wolff (WOOT! Participant)

“I made so many good friends. Our group bonded really well and we've been hanging out together almost every day since. It's been really nice to start school knowing other freshmen and having an amazing group of friends. My WOOT friends are now my core group of friends, I can't imagine being at Western without them now, they are people that know the true me which can be hard to find the first quarter of college. It was challenging and exhausting but sooooo rewarding.” – WOOT! Participant
“Going on a WOOT! trip was an incredibly valuable start to my Western experience. The trip helped me meet people and step outside my comfort zone and the trip leaders gently push me to try things I normally wouldn’t have. I also got to meet a diverse group of people, many of whom I probably wouldn’t have met without the WOOT! trip.” - Sam Martinez (WOOT! 2012)

“I learned to come into every situation with an open mind… which is something I already knew but was tested at the beginning of this trip. I've never been backpacking before so this was a totally new experience for me. Also, when I first met the other wooters on my trip, the majority of them didn't seem like people I would normally be drawn to. I've now discovered that they're all great people and all my friends, and I would not pick to go on the trip with different people for anything!” – WOOT! Participant

“The most important thing that I learned during WOOT! is how to truly connect with people on a very genuine level. Telling our life stories was really meaningful to me because it gave you more of a sense of the background of the people you were with, and also helped get some stuff off your chest. Everyone's life stories were really unique and interesting.” - WOOT! Participant
“Every part of that trip was a great experience. I had a fantastic time and got to meet so many amazing people that greatly cushioned my transition to Western. Our leaders talked about their college experiences and what to expect and what there is to be excited about”. – WOOT! Participant

“I really feel like I have an upper hand already on the social aspect of school compared to people that did not go on this trip...I cannot praise the trip leaders more for their hard work on the trip. They truly made it an amazing experience, they kept the energy up and really brought out the best in each and every one of us.” - Peter E. Linton (WOOT! Participant)
“WOOT WOOT! I made it! This trip was one of the most challenging things I have done in a long

when I saw the WOOT! poster outside of the OC, I knew I had to go! But as the trip

approached, I started second-guessing myself. Who was I, Kelli Borchers the city-girl, to think I

had what it takes to spend a week in the woods. But... I DID IT! WOOT! was perfect. Though

there were so many moments where I wanted nothing more than to drop my pack and cry I just

kept telling myself, “Kelli, you were meant to be here, keep on going!” And I did!! I thought I

liked the outdoors before this trip, but I only now realize that I don’t just like it, I love the

outdoors!” – Kelli Borchers (WOOT! Participant)

Would you recommend WOOT! to other incoming students? Yes, Why?

1. YES - I recommend anyone who loves the outdoors or wants to love the outdoors to go

on a WOOT! trip. It was the most amazing experience ever and it truly helped me

transition to being a student at Western! I gained so many close friends and had the

time of my life being in the outdoors for a week!

2. YES - If coming into your freshman year with a solid group of friends isn't a good enough

reason in itself you get to explore the area around your new school and get your foot in

the door with the outdoor center.

3. YES - It is such an amazing experience, and I don't think anyone could regret doing it.

Even if you have no outdoor experience the trip is really fun and enjoyable, and you get

be with a pretty incredible group of people while being in the beauty of nature.
88% of students who participated in WOOT! were retained from their first year to second year as compared to 84% retention rate of students who did not participate in WOOT!

The average 1st Term GPA of WOOT! participants was higher than students who did not participate in WOOT!
ADMISSIONS – RECRUITMENT

Recruiting Out-of-State Students

Western attracts many students from Colorado, Alaska, Oregon, Montana and Wyoming and many of them choose Western because of the ideal location and access to unlimited recreation experiences through the Outdoor Center. Since WOOT! began, we have had students from 15 states (including Alaska and Hawaii) participate in the program. This happened without any intentional outreach or recruitment to out-of-state students. This clearly demonstrates the excitement and interest from these students for a program like this. To help them connect to the place, the people and their new environment, there is really nothing better! Working with Admissions, the Ethnic Student Center, Student Outreach Services and the LEADS Program, there is a lot of potential to use WOOT! to recruit incoming students from out-of-state and get them connected, so that they stay here.

“If Western didn’t have this program (WOOT!), I probably would have gone to school somewhere else, somewhere where they had this type of outdoor orientation for students, it was that important for me.” - Hannah Besso (WOOT 2012)
WOOT! 2013 Programming Timeline

There are a lot of things that need to be done throughout the year in order to create successful and safe WOOT! experiences for incoming students. Some of those include hiring and training trip leaders, communicating with incoming students, and planning the logistics regarding transportation, routes and itineraries. To gain an understanding of the timeline from now until the trips happen in September, here is a brief outline of the tasks that need to be completed.

**February** – Interviewed WOOT! Leaders

**March** – Offered positions to 21 WOOT! Leaders for next fall

**April** – Plan WOOT! Leader Training

**May 1st** – Finalize the Online Registration Form

**May 3-5th** – WOOT! Leader Training Weekend

**Mid-May** – Post promo video on the “You’re Admitted to Western Facebook Page”

**June 8th** – Online Registration opens at 10am

**June 10th** – Update the WOOT! Website that trips are full

**June** – On-going communication with parents and participants

**June 30th** – Complete Expenditure Requests for supplies and materials

**August 1st** – Confirm participant materials are in

**August** – Email participants detailed information about arrival

**August** – Preparation for trip leader training and trips – Menu Planning and Food Shopping

**Sept. 6th – 11th** – WOOT! Leader Training

**Sept. 12-14th** – WOOT! Trip Preparations

**Sept. 15th** – Students arrive on campus – Early move-in with Residence Life

**Sept. 16 – 21st** – WOOT! Trips

**October 1st** – WOOT! Welcome Back BBQ
## How the WOOT! Program Aligns with the Division of ESS

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<th>Division-Wide Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>WOOT! Learning Outcomes</th>
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| **Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Competence**  
Students reflect and self-assess, gain self-confidence, communicate with honesty and respect for self and others, and engage in healthy relationships. | **Student will increase their confidence and self-awareness**  
Students will engage in new and challenging activities that will give them an opportunity to be see their own potential and capabilities. Through reflection opportunities and guided activities, students will learn more about themselves, and will set personal and academic goals. |
| **Social Responsibility**  
Students seek, respect, and integrate diverse perspectives of others as a resource for learning, work, and responsible local and global citizenship. | **Students will develop meaningful relationships with peers and build a supportive community**  
Through team buildings initiatives, group exercises, outdoor activities and sharing life stories, students will build meaningful relationships with their peers and feel a sense of belonging to Western and to WOOT! |
| **Practical Competence**  
Students take responsibility to meet their learning and personal needs, develop and implement an intentional curricular and co-curricular plan, and use campus resources. | **Exhibit a greater understanding of the university culture**  
Through “campfire chats” about Western & what to expect, students will gain an increased understanding of what it means to be a student at Western. Upperclassmen will provide helpful information about on-campus resources, how to engage with professors and discuss ways to get involved at Western. |
| **Stewardship of Individual and Community Health**  
Students exercise good judgment in caring for their own health and demonstrate responsibility for the economic, social, and environmental health of their communities. | **Acquire environmental and cultural awareness of their new surroundings**  
Through environmental and native cultural lessons about the Pacific Northwest, students will develop a greater connection and sense of responsibility for the new communities they belong to. |
| **Responsible Leadership**  
Students develop moral and ethical reasoning, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required for making decisions for and about themselves and the communities around them. | **Cultivate interpersonal communication and leadership skills**  
Through outdoor activities, students will engage with others on the trip through meaningful ways during leadership exercises in decision-making, goal setting and effective conflict resolution. |
USING A CURRICULAR APPROACH TO OUTDOOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

The WOOT! program goes beyond just taking people outside and have a good time. There are specific sequenced activities throughout the course of the trip that are implemented in order for students to have a meaningful and impactful experience. Trip leaders are trained to deliver this curriculum effectively and provide opportunities for incoming students to develop self-confidence and leadership skills as well as build a strong community and connection to Western.
STRATEGIC VISION – INCREASE CAPACITY & OFFERINGS

Evidence that the demand is greater than the current capacity of the program:

- Emails and phone calls from parents and students
- 60 students were put on a waitlist after the trips filled up in 4 hours for WOOT 2012 trips

An example of the demand – especially for out-of-state students (this is one of many emails I received)

To whom it may concern:

I was planning on registering for the Kayaking in the San Juan Islands Orientation trip today, June 2nd. The application opened yesterday and every single trip is already full. The very limited availability makes me extremely disappointed. Because I am an out-of-state student I am unable to make the trip up to Western for any of the Summerstart orientation dates. So, going on one of the WOOT! trips would have been an alternative option to meet other freshman at Western prior to school starting. I applied for early admission to Western and was accepted in November. Soon after, I heard about the WOOT! trips and have been planning on going since that time. I am extremely upset there is such limited available spots for the program.
Vision:
Within the next 5 years WOOT! will become the most impactful and effective orientation program that Western offers for first-year students.

Looking Ahead:
10% of the incoming class of Western students will participate in WOOT! by the year 2020.

History:
WOOT! began as a pilot program in the fall of 2010 with 10 students. In the spring of 2011, WOOT! was granted funding to cover the next 3 years of start-up costs for the program.

Here is the 3-year plan that was proposed and approved by the AS Board:
- Fall 2011 – 3 trips (26 participants & 9 trip leaders)
  - This trip has already happened
- Fall 2012 – 5 trips (45 students & 15 trip leaders)
  - This trip has already happened
- Fall 2013 – 7 trips (approx. 63 students & 21 trip leaders)

The hope is that this program continues to grow and develop into a larger and more impactful program at Western. The following is an estimated long-term plan of increasing the capacity of these trips over time:

- Fall 2014 – 10 trips (approx. 100 students & 20 trip leaders)
- Fall 2015 – 15 trips (approx. 150 students & 30 trip leaders)
- Fall 2016 – 20 trips (approx. 200 students & 40 trip leaders)
- Fall 2017 – 25 trips (approx. 250 students & 50 trip leaders)
- Fall 2018 – 30 trips (approx. 300 students & 60 trip leaders)
- Fall 2019 – 35 trips (approx. 350 students & 70 trip leaders)
- Fall 2020 – 40 trips (approx. 400 students & 80 trip leaders)

By the year 2020
10% of the incoming class of Western students will participate in WOOT!
RECOMMENDATIONS TO INSTITUTIONALIZE WOOT!

RECOMMENDATION #1 — HIRE A FULL-TIME COORDINATOR

Create a full-time position to coordinate the WOOT! program as it continues to grow in interest, demand and capacity.

Rational:
- 80% of Outdoor Orientation Programs around the country are run by a [full-time] professional director (Bell, 2006).
- WOOT! has the incredible potential to grow and expand its offerings in order to provide a more comprehensive approach to expose incoming students to outdoor recreation in a supportive environment focused on community building and personal growth.

Here are a few examples of what is possible:
- Offer ongoing and continual programs for incoming freshmen and transfer students through weekend-long programs throughout the entire year
- Work with the Veteran’s Outreach Center to provide outdoor experiences for this unique population
- Build relationships with faculty to offer credit-based WOOT! programs in the future
- Provide on-going opportunities for WOOT! participants to develop leadership skills – WOOT! Crews
- Develop programs with the International Student Programs
- Provide a WOOT! Graduation Trip for past WOOTers as a capstone experience.
- Create an on-going mentorship program between WOOT! Leaders and WOOT! participants throughout their first year at Western
- Develop a credit-bearing Outdoor Leadership course through the Recreation Program.
- Provide on-going internship opportunities for Recreation majors to learn about Outdoor Orientation programs.
WOOT! PROGRAM COORDINATOR JOB DESCRIPTION

- Provide on-going strategic direction and coordination of the WOOT program.
- Coordinate hiring, training, and supervision of student staff.
- Develop program curriculum and long-term development for implementation of the programs over time.
- Increase capacity of trips and create new opportunities for first-year students to engage in outdoor adventure pursuits.
- Prepare and review correspondence with participants, staff and vendors.
- Coordinate and collaborate across campus to create stronger connections across the university to enhance the overall support of this program.
- Work with the Western Foundation to obtain funding for scholarships to provide financial support to low-income and/or PELL eligible students.
- Coordinate the WOOT! Scholarship application and acceptance process.
- Review applications and perform interviews for WOOT! Trip Leaders.
- Plan and facilitate training for WOOT! Leaders, in the areas of Facilitation, Wilderness Skills, Safety Management, and Leadership and Group Dynamics.
- Collaborate with Residence Life to provide early move-in for students participating in WOOT!
- Develop and implement a marketing plan for the WOOT! program.
- Manage and update the WOOT! Website and Facebook Page.
- Utilize best practices and current research in outdoor education in order to continue the development and implementation of the WOOT! program.
- Develop assessment tools that track the impact of the WOOT! experience on students through graduation.
- Provide on-going mentorship for WOOT! participants and Trip Leaders.
- Prepare annual reports on the progress and development of the WOOT! program.
- Organize and coordinate a Strategic Advisory Board that meets quarterly.
RECOMMENDATION #2 – DEVELOP STRATEGIC ADVISORY BOARD

Establish a strategic advisory board, which would include students, staff, faculty and eventually alumni of the program in order to review and clarify WOOT’s mission, goals and program objectives.

Rational:

The objective of having a strategic advisory board would be to meet quarterly to discuss the on-going development of WOOT as it relates to the mission, vision and direction of the program. These meetings can also serve to enhance and increase communication regarding the value of this program across the campus community.

- Fred Collins – Outdoor Center Manager
- Jim Schuster – Director of Viking Union Facilities
- Keith Russell – Professor in PEHR (Physical Education, Health & Recreation)
- Steve Vanderstay – Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
- Ted Pratt – Dean of Students
- Admissions Representative
- New Student Services and Family Outreach Representative
RECOMMENDATION #3 – INCREASE SCHOLARSHIP FUNDS

Continue to grow scholarship funds to increase the participation of low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students.

Rational:
An important component of the WOOT program is to ensure access for students who are coming from low-income, first-generation and underrepresented backgrounds to participate in the program. In order to do this, we must establish a fund with the Western Foundation and develop a strategic plan to raise funds and scholarships for students to participate in the program.

Here is a letter from one student who received a scholarship and the impact the experience has had on his experience at Western:

I was honored to receive a scholarship towards my WOOT experience, and I’m deeply grateful! I was very hesitant about coming to college this year, but having an ideal orientation program (for me, ideal is synonymous with "outdoor") to look forward to was a driving factor to get me to school. Knowing that I would be doing something I loved (backpacking) with people I would connect with on a deep, genuine level was very encouraging. I firmly believe that you cannot connect with someone truly until you go out of doors and face challenges and the primal adversity that shaped our species, and through WOOT I have done just that. Even though I loved getting to know the environment around where I would be studying (providing a mental escape and a comforting familiarity with the area) I cannot stress enough how wonderful it is to start off my freshman year, feeling like I have a family of fellow outdoor lovers, many who I feel more connected to after just a few days backpacking than some of my old friends who I have known for years. This was made possible by your generous support, and it is received with much thanks.

As I’m sure you know, one of the most stressful parts of college is the knowledge of the amount of money that I am spending in such a relatively short time. Although it is well worth it for a well-rounded education, it is still very daunting and it makes the "optional" money driven activities that much more intimidating. The WOOT trip was not a technical necessity for my college experience but in my mind it was a necessity. My mom and I joked a lot before I left that I just wanted to go backpacking and then come back home, but thanks to the wonderful support and community I feel created by the program, I am thoroughly enjoying school, and can worry more about my scholarly pursuits since I have had such great social success. I cannot convey how grateful I am to have gotten to go on the WOOT trip and it was made possible because of your scholarship and it will undoubtedly be a highlight of my life, not just my university experience so thank you many, many times over. I cannot thank you enough, but I will emphasize that the experience was invaluable to my life and overall outlook about college.

Gratefully,
Cody Shotola-Schiewe (2012 WOOT! Scholarship Recipient)
CONCLUSION

The Western Outdoor Orientation Trip Program is full of incredible potential and enormous possibility in having a strong impact on first-year students at Western. The program aids in attraction, recruitment, and retention, especially for out-of-state students. This powerfully transformative experience has had a profound impact on the lives of student who engage in the program both as participants and trip leaders and we would like to see it become a permanent program here at Western.

With effective coordination of this program, the offerings can go beyond the week-long experience that is currently offered for incoming freshmen by creating program opportunities throughout the year for a variety of students including transfer students, international students, veterans and other at-risk student populations. The possibilities are endless!

It is clear the WOOT is everything that Western is striving to be and has the potential to be a cornerstone of this incredible university. Next steps moving forward would be to find the funding to make expanding and continuing this program a reality. It is time to pull together the stakeholders and determine a course of action for this program to continue changing the lives of students at Western. Thank you for reading for your time and for your support.