

Zac Worth

Environmental Journalism -- feature article assignment

Friday, December 8

Synopsis of article: This article is a feature piece covering the UC Center for Field Studies, with a specific angle on what draw there is for students to want to involve themselves.

Target publication: Given that this article is very UC-focused, my ideal publication would be UC News. I do also feel that this article could work for non-professional destinations such as BearCast Media and The News Record.

Word count: 1482

Accessible Nature at the UC Center for Field Studies

A gentle breeze whistles through the air, causing stretches of tall grass to dance lazily in the light of the setting sun. Birds chirp from the treetops and insects buzz around the seemingly endless carpet of flowers. The stresses of college life are a mere afterthought in this outdoor paradise. So where are all the students? Over at the University of Cincinnati's main campus, either fighting for a hammocking spot, narrowly avoiding other blankets to set up for a picnic on the quad, or arguing about overlapping Spike Ball games. Students can be heard muttering phrases such as "concrete campus" or simply wondering out loud where all the greenery is. This problem of not enough green space is only worsening at UC, with the rising enrollment rate and the seemingly endless construction blocking off bits and pieces of the already rare nature spots on campus. This makes for what can be a rather unpleasant experience trying to enjoy the outdoors. There has to be a better way.

A hop, a skip, and a 20 mile drive reveals a solution. This outdoor paradise, better known as the UC Center for Field Studies, is one of UC's hidden gems. This piece of land that stretches for nearly 18 acres serves as both an educational institution and a place to simply enjoy the outdoors. The problem, however, is that not enough students know it even exists.

The Center itself has a simple premise. Their mission statement states it serves as a blend of science and know-how from the field through connection to the great outdoors. The land itself

features multiple types of native habitats such as mixed mesophytic eastern deciduous forests, marshes, restored prairies, and riparian forests. The endless stretches of trees range from young secondary growth to flora over 200 years old. The land is also home to a very unique slice of history. The property features a farmhouse and a barn built in the 1830's by William Walker, the first European inhabitant of the land. In the 1850's, the land was bought by the Whitewater Shakers and used as a home for orphans and newcomers to their community. They lived on the land until they sold it in the early 1900's. It was later bought by the Hamilton County Park District in 1991, and eventually a long-term partnership was established with UC in 2008 in order to create the center. Today, the center is home to cutting edge and innovative research in biological sciences, environmental sciences, anthropology, and more. The center is currently performing research on various topics such as groundwater, invasive species, green technology, public health, and climate change. On the docket for the future includes research in fish ecology and demographics in Southwest Ohio, wolf spider auditory reception and mating systems, butterfly flight simulation and sensory perception, bird population studies, visual systems of jumping spiders, and grey treefrog physiology and behavior. They also have several ongoing student-led projects, such as honeysuckle removal and wetland percolation, as well as working with programs such as iNaturalist. In addition to all of this, the center also has several collaborators and partners. This list includes Great Parks of Hamilton County, Cincinnati Parks, Hamilton County Conservation District, Mill Creek Alliance, Rivers Unlimited, Green Umbrella, Preserve Burnet Woods, and the Civic Garden Center of Greater Cincinnati. They also work with the university to add an educational aspect to the center. Several classes offered at UC have some sort of connection with the center, including but not limited to Ornithology (BIOL 3012C), Environmental Field Techniques (BIOL 3011C), Environmental Studies Capstone (EVST

5011/5012), and Biology Capstone (BIOL 5050). To top off a long list of student involvement opportunities, they also offer an internship in either field identification work or environmental communication.

Despite all of these student involvement opportunities, there still seems to be a general sense of both apathy and ignorance about the center's existence. The center is a feature of the University of Cincinnati, yet most students do not know it exists. Many innovative ways to promote the center and ideally drive some student traffic toward it through free events, field trips and research projects have been tried over and over again to minimal success. So what is the issue? Izzy Leisgang, current graduate assistant at the center and avid fan of nature, explains that the center is only staffed by three people. Ken Petren, who serves full-time as the center's director, Roger Ruff, who works as a part-time facilities manager, and then Izzy herself, the single graduate assistant. Because of this, hands are spread thin. There simply is not enough bandwidth to both run and market the center at the same time.

Josie Hughes, a student at UC, did not know about the center when she enrolled in Environmental Journalism (JOUR 3040) for her fall semester. This all changed on September 6, 2023. Thanks to a field trip through this class, she was able to spend a few hours exploring the center and learning all about exactly what it has to offer. "I thought it was beautiful," she gushed, "Seeing all the super old barns and buildings on the property and then hearing about the history was very interesting. Being able to go on a walk through the prairie and the creek, seeing bats and wildlife, and hearing about their sustainability practices was very cool." Hughes added that one of her favorite moments from the trip was when she found a fully intact coyote jaw submerged in the bed of the dried up creek, and shared another story of being able to enter one of the old barns and discovered dozens of bats asleep not too far above her head. "The air just feels

better when you're there," she says, "You could hear the birds, you could hear the bugs, everything is just so serene and nice. And you're still only 20 to 30 minutes away from the city!" Hughes' only complaint was the lack of public events. While there is a public calendar on the website, it is currently empty. She believes these events would bring about a lot of engagement, and eventually form a habit for people to come and simply hang out.

A similar story comes from Alyssa Conley, another UC student who experienced the center for the first time also on a field trip through her Ecology and Evolution lab focusing on biodiversity on September 20, 2023. The class visited the center to learn more about the process for prescribed burns that are done to manage the prairies, and how they affect the biodiversity of the land. In addition to her research, she was able to simply enjoy what the center has to offer. "It was really peaceful," Conley says. "There was just a lot of open air and it was just really pretty." She specifically made note of picnic tables she planned on coming back and using, and spoke on all the wildlife that cannot be seen while walking around Clifton, a problem common to all urban-based campuses.

The UC Center for Field Studies is, at the end of the day, a space for the students. While research and conservation are the priorities, Leisgang says that the center strives to be "a facility for anything students would like to utilize it for." While Leisgang herself only came to the center once during her undergraduate time at UC, she visited both during her gap year that she took and once she started on her graduate program. She accredits those visits with how she was able to secure her role as the graduate assistant under Petren, but still wishes she had gone more as an undergraduate. Now, the possibilities for students are endless. The horticulture club utilizes the land to grow hems and hops. The DAAP department hosts their annual retreat there, as have the English and Psychology departments. Events such as meditation circles and writing camps are

held there. “It’s a really nice place for students to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city and be out in more of a rural area,” Leisgang says. Even in her free time, she still finds herself at the center, walking with her dog and exploring every inch of the property. There is a particular pond nestled in one of the prairies, known as the Knollman Prairie, that she frequents. She shared an experience where her and her dog got to sit and watch a longnose turtle underneath a frozen section of the pond during a chilly February. “The most fascinating thing I’ve experienced out there,” she says.

Words simply cannot do enough to properly capture the essence of the UC Center for Field Studies. Anyone missing nature or wanting to partake in exploration, research, or conservation efforts should consider a visit. The Center can be found at 11053 Oxford Rd, Harrison, OH 45030, and more information is on their website - <https://www.ucfieldcenter.com/>.

Source List

Josie Hughes (hughe2ja@mail.uc.edu) - I want to interview Josie and ask her about her time visiting the Center for the first time. I want to gauge her first impressions, find out what she liked and what she didn't like, and see if she plans on going back.

Alyssa Conley (conleyaf@mail.uc.edu) – I used my interview with Alyssa to find out more about her experience with the Center due to class reasons, specifically her ecology lab.

Izzy Leisgang (leisgaia@mail.uc.edu) – I used this interview for the bulk of the information written about the center, as well as her personal experiences with it as both a student and as the graduate assistant.

Both my Ken Petren interview and my horticulture club contact interview fell through.

Secondary Sources

- Their website <https://www.ucfieldcenter.com/>
- UC’s website page about them <https://www.artsci.uc.edu/research/centers-institutes/fieldstudies.html>