

The Unsung Heroes of Transfer Programs

Florida is known for its rich natural heritage and mild climate but what isn't known by most are the hundreds of plants and animals' species that are endangered or threatened. With 60 percent of all threatened species and 40 percent of all endangered species wetland dependent it's important we consider if we are doing enough to restore and protect these ecosystems. In the Florida Western Panhandle many of these T&E species like the Gopher Tortoise, Red-Cockaded Woodpecker, and the Indigo snake are widely known but there are many more like the Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander, Gopher Frog, or Pine Barrens Treefrog that could soon be lost and forgotten if action isn't taken. Protecting these species requires habitat restoration of wetlands conducted by capable forces on the ground who have the knowledge needed to implement conservation management and can safely use chainsaws, brush cutters and other tools to restore wetland structure and function. This restoration work includes invasive and aggressive species control, turning back the effects of years of fire suppression and implementing prescribed fire measures. Fortunately, the Longleaf Alliance (LLA) understands that one organization alone can't restore wetlands so in 1995 they established a large multi-agency partnership with the express purpose of coordinating these efforts. The partnership includes private landowners, forest industries, state and federal agencies, conservation groups, researchers, and other enthusiasts interested in managing and restoring longleaf pine forests and their associated wetland ecosystems.

One of those partners is the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCEPEP) Wetland Ecosystem Support Team (WEST) which is led by a senior team member and three additional team members. This four-member team is responsible for restoration of priority isolated wetlands identified by GCEPEP in the Western Panhandle of Florida, with an emphasis on habitat restoration for rare, threatened, and endangered species. They are required to manually restore wetlands to encourage groundcover regrowth and improve fire behavior, all to help endangered species of frogs and salamanders. To meet the many challenges of managing such a large and significant landscape each member of this team is required to have specific skill sets. This includes having a degree in ecology or natural resource conservation, related work experience and the ability to work in very hot and dangerous environments. They must also have basic fire qualifications or willing to complete training that requires passing the Pack Test at the Arduous level (3miles, 45 lbs., in less than 45 minutes). Fortunately, GCEPEP knows they can count on graduates of the Natural Resource Conservation program at the University of Florida to be more than qualified for these positions. Currently all four members of WEST team are graduates of not only the University of Florida, but they all received their degree from one of the UF off-campus teaching programs in Milton Florida. All four the members, Ed O'Daniel's, Nick Barys, Kelsea Heider and Brian Whalen, completed their bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Conservation at Milton. The UF/Milton programs have been in place since 1995 and many of the Natural Resource Conservation jobs in the region are filled by these graduates.

Those who wish to be admitted to one of UF's off-campus programs must apply to the University of Florida the same way as other transfer students throughout the nation. All UF transfer students face the same rigorous admission standards and are admitted or denied admissions using specific requirements established by the respective college at the university. Students applying to off-campus teaching centers know it's less likely they will be rejected for lack of space as can happen in Gainesville. The greatest benefits of having a bachelor's degrees in Natural Resource Conservation or Plant Science and attending a Top 10 university at an off-campus center is that these local students can stay at home, work in the region before and after graduation and make a difference in their local community.

The University of Florida and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is committed to bringing quality educational opportunities to students throughout Florida and these statewide programs allow transfer students to make their dream a reality. The Bachelor of Science degrees in Natural Resource Conservation or Plant Science in Milton are faculty



developed and focused on the student's specific interests and career goals. The programs offer both applied and real-life experiences where students spend an average of three-four weekends a semester (per class) in the field applying topics they have learned in class. The Milton programs allow students to experience and work with the many experts in the Panhandle of Florida and to see how natural resources including plants are managed in areas of federal/state land, areas of land trusts and private lands.

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