

## Services & Activities Fee Annual Program Review

Program Name: The Observer  
Program Manager: Francesco Somaini (ad interim)  
Fiscal Year: FY2023

1. In what ways does your program support CWU students? Please be specific, yet concise.

The Observer is the student-led newspaper available to the entire CWU student population—both in hard copy and online at <https://cwuobserver.com>. Distribution points also make it available to all CWU faculty and staff as well as a large portion of the Ellensburg community. It is also delivered to CWU campus university centers throughout the state.

With faculty adviser guidance, the student leadership staff directs and leads a team to cover, write and assemble information relevant to students, CWU and the community. The Observer keeps the campus and local community informed of stories and issues at and relevant to CWU, providing reporting and coverage on topics such as news, features, profiles, sports, events, community and national issues, and much more.

Student employees can also include advertising sales representatives and distributors. All students gain valuable, real-world experience with working in a newsroom, journalistic professionalism, teamwork, management and working under deadlines.

The Observer's students come from various programs and majors on campus, and the opportunity to form part of The Observer staff is open to any CWU student. The Observer also continues to win regional and national awards for its work.

A minimum of 8 and up to 20 student employees make up the editorial and leadership staff. With mentorship from a faculty adviser in the Media and Journalism program, students oversee the entire production of the newspaper – from conceiving of ideas and laying out the pages, to reporting, writing, editing and photographing stories. Students also promote the magazine on and offline. They rose the challenges of reporting during a pandemic.

2. What are your specific program goals or learning/operational objectives? How are you assessing the effectiveness of your program in achieving those targets?

Students writing stories and producing other content for The Observer learn how to communicate effectively to broad audiences, identify and properly label facts vs opinions, employ news values to select information, and apply ethical standards to the gathering of newsworthy information. Students in paid staff positions at The Observer also learn invaluable leadership skills, copyediting techniques, layout design, best online and social media practices, marketing, advertising, and media relations skills.

We assess the targets through a weekly critique, performed in class by and with the support of the faculty adviser, of the published product. The faculty adviser also conducts an ongoing evaluation of the paid staff culminating in a mid-quarter and end-of-quarter assessment of said staff.

3. What is the overall purpose of your program and what service(s) does your program provide?
  - a. Are there overlaps or intersections with other university programs who have a similar purpose or service?

The Observer keeps the campus and local community informed of stories and issues at and relevant to CWU, providing reporting and coverage on topics such as news, features, profiles, sports, events, community and national issues, and much more.

The operations and service that The Observer provides intersect with those of the other student media: PULSE magazine and Central News Watch. However, the newsrooms of the three outlets operate separately because they produce different kinds of news and feature stories. They may sometimes cover the same topics, but they generally do so from different angles dictated by the characteristics of the different media: different schedules, formats, and to some extent audiences.

4. How does your program align with the purpose of S&A funding? *“Supporting cocurricular and extracurricular activities and programs participated in by students in the furtherance of their education.”*

All students gain valuable, real-world experience with working in a newsroom, journalistic professionalism, teamwork, management and working under deadlines. By working for The Observer, students put in practice knowledge that they learn in virtually all the courses that they take at CWU.

5. How does your program support CWU’s mission and goals? (<https://www.cwu.edu/mission/>)

CWU’s mission states that “In order to build a community of equity and belonging, Central Washington University nurtures culturally sustaining practices that expand access and success to all students. We are committed to fostering high impact practices, sustainability, and authentic community partnerships that are grounded in meaningful relationships.”

The Observer is a high-impact practice offer that allows all CWU students interested in it to practice the written and oral communication skills that the General Education Program aims to teach, learn leadership skills, enjoy their First Amendment rights, and build a professional portfolio for job hunting purposes. The student-run newspaper provides an independent voice (that of CWU’s students—not CWU’s Administration or faculty) that shares information about CWU and the Ellensburg community necessary to pursue the “sustainability,” “meaningful relationships” and “authentic community partnerships” indicated by the University’s mission.

6. Please provide detailed information regarding who utilizes your program? (*Students, faculty, staff, community? Specific demographic information? Class standing, gender, ethnicity, transfer, campus location, etc.*)

The Observer is a student-run operation supported by the College of Arts and Humanities through the professional and academic advising provided by faculty and staff of the Department of Communication. The program is open to and utilized by undergraduate students of all demographics (including gender, race and ethnicity), class standing, transfer and non-transfer status. Because the courses taken by students to participate in the operations of The Observer are typically offered in person on the Ellensburg campus, students enrolled on other campuses are rarely on staff.

7. How many unique CWU students utilize your program or services?  
a. How do you gather these metrics?

- b. If you do not, what is preventing you from getting that data and how are you determining usage by CWU students?

All 9,000+ students enrolled at CWU are served by and have access to The Observer, which is a free publication.

Between the Winter quarter of 2021 and the Winter quarter of 2023, 92 (ninety-two) unique students have taken COM 444 which is the course in which students enroll in order to produce content for The Observer. Of those students, 35 were journalism majors, four Communication majors, and 19 Public Relations majors; the remaining 34 were pursuing majors or minors in Accessibility Studies, Art, Business Administration, Psychology, Dance English, Film, Social Sciences, Political Science, STEM Teaching, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality. Students who take on leadership roles, which are paid positions, in The Observer take COM 444 more than once.

- a. An Oracle PeopleSoft (CWU's internal software) query allows the Department Chair and Secretary Supervisor to access the roster of the course taken by students who work for The Observer.
- b. N/A.

8. Are there any current vacant positions in your program?

All student media have been operating without a stable business manager for over a year. A temporary business manager hired in the spring of 2022 left the position before their training was completed. A new secretary supervisor of the Department of Communication has been hired and is going to take on the position of student media business manager starting January 9, 2023. The new manager will be able to provide additional information once fully trained.

9. Given the budget reductions taking place and continuing for the remainder of the funding cycle, please tell us what specific impacts those reductions have had on your program compared to what was originally planned and including in your initial base funding request.

To curb expenses as a consequence of the reduced S&A allocation, we reduced the number of copies of The Observer to the minimum for the printing company to be willing to print the paper. However, rampant inflation and supply chain disruptions following the Covid-19 pandemic have offset some of those savings. In addition, minimum wage adjustments chip off The Observer's budget each year. Also, the absence of a stable student media business manager has compounded the reduction of advertising revenue that had already had a hugely negative impact on the newspaper's budget in FY21. We had a positive balance only thanks to reduced printing costs, because we employed fewer students on staff, and because the pandemic has also meant limited opportunities for traveling to conferences. With additional S&A allocation reductions, The Observer is going to deplete its reserves very soon.

10. Are there any circumstances or challenges that are currently impacting your ability to use your base funding allocation this year?

Not that the ad-interim program manager is aware of.

11. What growth or increases would you like to see in your program in the future?

The Observer is a solid program. We would like to see it grow further but the enrollment decline CWU has been experiencing does not realistically allows us to project it.