

TEXAS FAST NEWSLETTER

fall 2024

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TEXAS FAST MISSION

TEXAS FAST stands for **T**exas **E**xperiential Learning **A**nd **S**cholarship program for **F**ood and **A**gricultural **S**cience **T**raining, and it is a grant program unique to OLLU. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), a division of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded this 5-year, \$5,000,000 project as part of the NextGen initiative to diversify the future workforce of the USDA.

The goal of TEXAS FAST is to increase career readiness by reducing financial burdens and providing learning experiences that prepare students to be competitive in the environmental science job market and/or graduate school. It provides students majoring or minoring in Environmental Science and Sustainability experiential learning, scholarship, collaborative educational opportunities, and career training. Building social connections among peers, networking, and exploring career opportunities, research and internships are key components of the TEXAS FAST program.

The 2024-2025 school year is year two of this five-year grant, and we are excited to share the program's successes here!

TEXAS FAST's Project Director is Associate Professor Dr. Briana Salas and Instructor Adam Bynum



Cohort 1 of TEXAS FAST:



Transfer Students:



Cohort 1 Summer Experience

The TEXAS FAST program includes three summers worth of activities for scholars: 2 weeks of “Career Exploration and Nature Immersion” after Year 1, a paid research position after Year 2, and a paid internship after Year 3. Two weeks before school started this fall, Cohort 1 moved back in to the dorms to participate in Summer 1 programming. Marketing took headshots of students. The CCDT gave workshops on resumes, cover letters, and interview skills. Students had a full-day workshop on how to tell their stories digitally. They toured the Office of Sustainability downtown and heard from USDA guest speakers. Additionally, students got to volunteer at and tour many places around San Antonio and the Hill Country. Three new OLLU transfer students also participated.

Volunteering at Garcia Street Urban Farm



Witte Museum Field Trip



EcoCentro Tour



Volunteering at the Food Bank



Water Treatment Plant Tour



Group Lunch in Spring Ranch



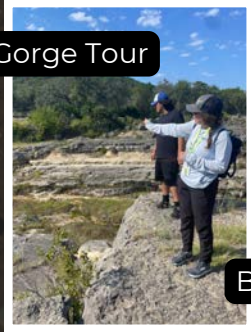
A&M Agrilife Extension Activity



Canyon Lake Gorge Tour



Bamberger Ranch Tour



Guadalupe State Park Tour

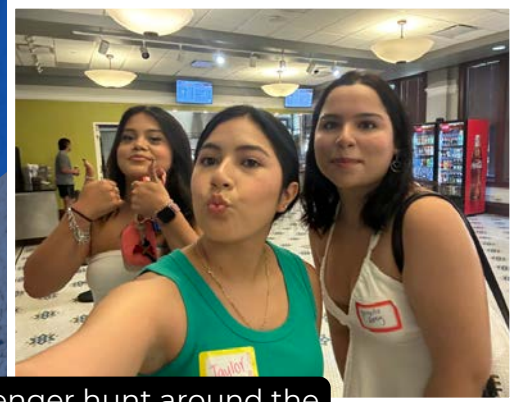


Cohort Two

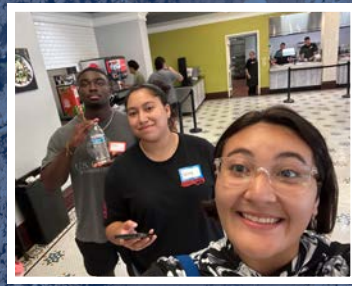
In addition to the three transfer students that joined Cohort 1 over the summer, 25 new students joined TEXAS FAST this school year as Cohort 2! We kicked off the new year with an orientation on August 15th.



Creating a vision board for the year ahead!



Scavenger hunt around the OLLU campus!

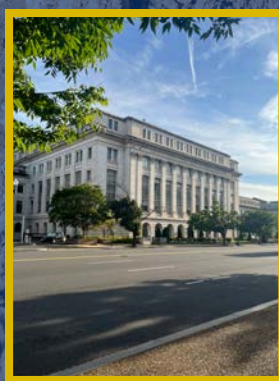


Project Directors' Meeting

Dr. Briana Salas and the new TEXAS FAST Grant Activities Manager, Austin Bergstrom, went to Washington, DC for the USDA's annual NextGen Project Directors' Meeting September 4-9. Dr. Salas presented on the progress of TEXAS FAST so far.



Watch out for the student version of this meeting in February 2025!



Volunteerism

Volunteering at the Monarch Butterfly and Pollinator Festival

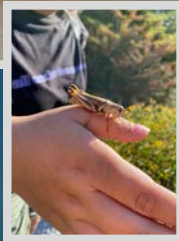
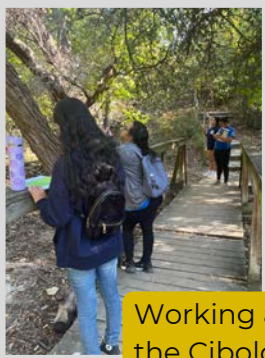
In order to experience the sustainability work being done around the city of San Antonio, spark curiosity, and actually get involved in making our environment more beautiful, TEXAS FAST scholars have participated in multiple volunteer events this fall semester.



We made 400 butterfly headbands for the festival



Collecting trash out of Lake Elmendorf along campus



Working as citizen scientists at the Cibolo Center for Conservation



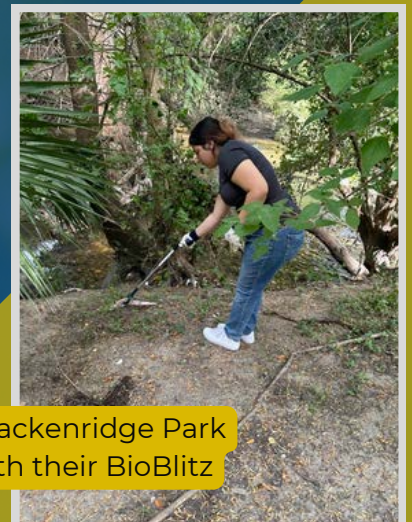
Volunteering at the SA Food Bank's Community Kitchen



Volunteering at Gardopia

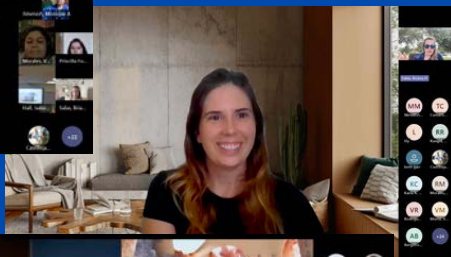
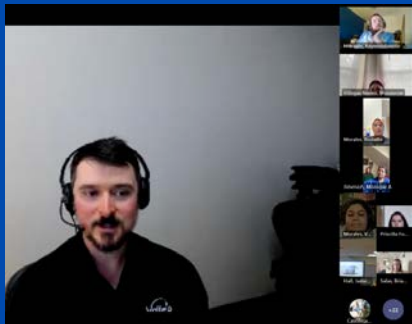


Cleaning up Brackenridge Park and helping with their BioBlitz



Guest SPEAKERS

Dr. Briana Salas hosts a fall seminar called "Careers in Environmental Sciences" which brings in professionals from a variety of backgrounds to discuss the path they took to their current job. Students are able to ask questions and build future networking connections. All TEXAS FAST scholars are required to attend these Friday speakers either virtually or in-person!



9/13

JENNIFER SMITH

Program specialist at USDA's Climate Hub in California

9/27

DR. SAM BORSTEIN

Assistant Professor of Biology at Texas State University

10/4

ISAAC NORRIS

Urban Conservationist at USDA's NRCS San Antonio Service Center

10/18

MARK HALL

Environmental Compliance Supervisor at wastewater treatment facility

10/25

ZABRINA RAPOZO

Climate Program Manager at SA Office of Sustainability

11/1

LUIS RIVAS

Environmental Assessor at SA Neighborhood & Housing Services

11/8

DR. GIANNA SHORT

Economist/Data Scientist at USDA's FBAC

Social Events

TEXAS FAST scholars live together in Flores Hall as part of the Environmental Science and Sustainability Living Learning Community (ESS LLC). This gives students a way to build friendships with like-minded peers. As part of the LLC, students have a built-in support system on campus. In addition to the educational and volunteer events, TEXAS FAST scholars also participate in social events.



Some of the social events TEXAS FAST scholars had this semester:

- Board-game luncheon
- Community lunches in the cafeteria once a month
- Fitness Field Day hosted by EIM-OC
- Halloween movie night and pumpkin painting
- Christmas movie night and ornament painting
- Secret Santa gift exchange



Confluence of Young Conservation Leaders

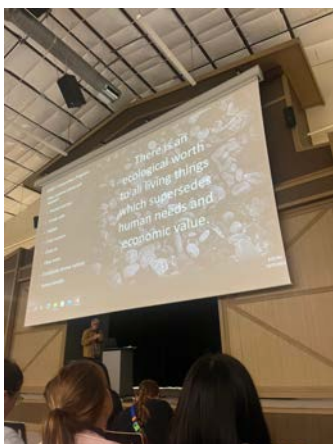
In October TEXAS FAST was able to send nine students to participate in the annual CYCL conference where they met other young conservation leaders from around the country. Over three days students visited sites around San Antonio such as Gardopia Gardens, Unbroken Circle Green Cemetery, San Juan Mission and Farm, Phil Hardberger Park, and Edward's Aquifer Outreach Center (Morgan's Camp). They networked with sustainability leaders in the community and attended workshops on resume-building, leadership development, interviewing, public speaking, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution.



At the conference we spoke about the importance of natural resources and how native species play a huge role in the conservation of not only the natural state of the land, but how it in turn allows for the native ecosystems to flourish. We saw a roadrunner and a hawk at this site at a relatively close distance, and I can say that it was a moment filled with awe to think about how Texas may have looked before its modern-day developments.



Michaela Mendez

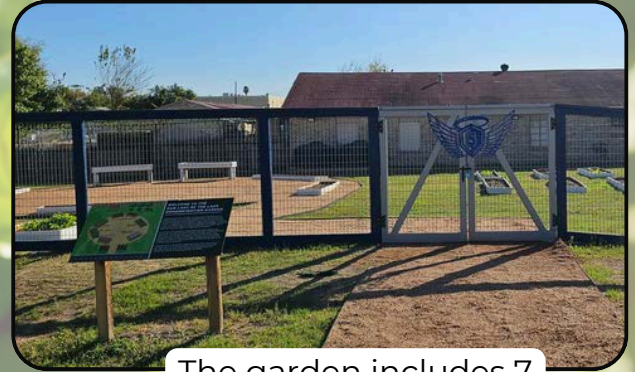


The Garden

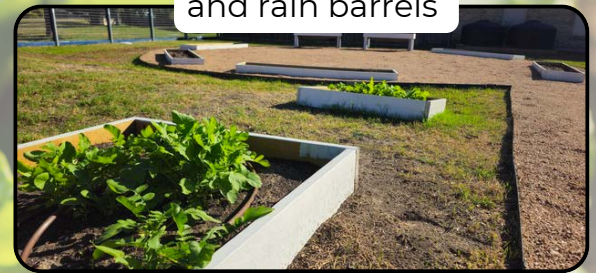


This semester the TEXAS FAST grant supported the construction of a community garden located at the Commerce Street entrance of the OLLU campus. The goals of this project are to :

- ★ Enhance food security by providing fresh produce to the community.
- ★ Create an educational platform for OLLU students, particularly those in the Environmental Science and Sustainability (ESS) program.
- ★ Serve as a community engagement hub, fostering awareness of sustainable agriculture.



The garden includes 7 garden beds, fruit trees, and rain barrels



First Harvest!

Although the garden construction was not completed until after peak planting season, students were able to harvest a large amount of daikon radishes before the winter break! When school resumes in January there will also be a harvest of spinach and cabbage. If you're interested in taking some home and trying out new recipes, reach out to Prof. Bynum!

Check out this daikon radish recipe students recommended



UPCOMING EVENTS

Germany Trip

TEXAS FAST is excited to be sponsoring three students to travel to Germany for 17 days in June 2025. Rudy Morales, Ruby Rangel, and Victoria Muniz will be joining students from the University of Southern Alabama to hike along a glacier, visit the world's only climate museum, and other activities related to sustainability!



Student Summit



USDA's NextGen program will be hosting a 2025

Agricultural Outlook Forum Student Summit in Washington DC in February 2025 and TEXAS FAST will be sending some of our scholars! Students will get to network with peers from around the world and tour some of DC's landmarks.

Events on Campus



Our students are looking forward to participating in more volunteering and social events in the next

semester. Stay on the lookout for another Lake Cleanup and Earth Day events!

Internships

The 7 scholars of Cohort will all be applying for research or internship positions for Summer 2025. If you come across any opportunities related to Environmental Science, please pass the information along! The TEXAS FAST grant has money built in to finance students in these roles.



Recruitment



Do you know a student enrolling at OLLU in Fall 2025 who is passionate about Environmental Science? TEXAS FAST is looking to recruit 15 new scholars for Cohort 3. Help us spread the word about this incredible opportunity!

Apply here

