

Finding resilience and strength in OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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Prescott College orientation instructors wade in the Wet Beaver Creek, near Sedona, Arizona. Photo by Erin Teutschel.

Outdoor education is more than just demonstrating skills — it's hands-on learning. It's using the environment to facilitate the experience. While those components are lacking in the online lessons, students are still benefiting and enjoying themselves.

"Time to melt the butter," Ringer said, putting a bowl into the microwave.

"I have to double boil my brother ... my butter," one of the students said, as the others laughed and joked at the tongue slip.

OUTDOOR EDUCATION SHIFT ACROSS THE MAP

While Formosa and Ringer work for the same institution year-round, Hannah Siler, another outdoor educator, works for multiple outdoor education organizations throughout the year. A number of organizations like Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) specialize in experiential/outdoor expeditions. NOLS hires contracted instructors with terms varying in length from a week to a few months.

Siler had work lined up for spring, summer and fall of 2020, but NOLS programs were cancelled. And quarantining in Asheville, North Carolina, with her family gave Siler time to reflect on the value of her work as an outdoor educator.

"It was hard having all my work cancelled, but at the same time it was kind of a blessing," she said. "It allowed me to redirect my focus. What do I do now to be of help, better myself and how I move through the world?"

She decided on a position with Prescott College, a small liberal arts school located in Prescott, Arizona, known chiefly for its outdoor education, environmental and social justice programming. The college facilitates an orientation for incoming students in the fall and spring that includes a three-week backpacking trip.

This past fall's orientation was no exception. Of course, careful protocols were

put in place that included testing for staff and students, masks in close quarters and social distancing. But in some ways, outdoor expeditions are uniquely set up for some of these precautions. Hygiene is always emphasized, including washing hands, proper cooking techniques and other strategies that help manage health for a group traveling and living outside together.

Since the trips are three weeks long, travelers feel fairly relaxed and safe together after the first 10 days in the field, essentially quarantining with no signs and symptoms of COVID (per CDC personnel recommendation).

Siler said that she sees students become really close on these trips, and while this year was hard, she felt that the students still got a lot out of it. "Even a few days out, you're outside, not checking the news, you're not hearing about COVID. It feels far away, which is nice for all of us."

Other outdoor educators feel similarly about running programs. Outdoor education is already set up for mitigating risk and adaptation. And they feel that what they do is more important now than ever.

When NOLS staff shut down programming in March, they spent time reviewing and revising protocols and weighing the risks and benefits. They ran a test course with staff figuring out how to cook meals, hold classes and build community while wearing masks and social distancing.

Staff members wrote in the NOLS blog that in addition to accounting for risk, "we also needed to answer the key question of whether running courses with these new protocols would serve our mission and students. And when we looked around, we could see a clear need for the leadership and wilderness education NOLS provides."

SUCCESSFUL ADAPTION

Outdoor educators seem to be finding their footing amidst this global health crisis. If there's one skill they pick up on the job, it's managing uncertainty.

In late November, staff manager Mike Wagner hosted an optional Zoom meeting for his staff at Deer Hill Expeditions, a small outdoor education organization. While Deer Hill and its small administrative team are located in southwestern Colorado, the 20 or so staff members that showed up to the meeting were from all over.

Staff tuned in from their kitchen tables, couches and cars from Virginia to Oregon, Utah to Mexico.

Deer Hill runs programs starting in the spring through early fall. Wagner wanted to connect with the community, discuss updates during the uncertain times and gauge interest for the upcoming season. Deer Hill staff were gearing up for one of their busiest seasons in 2020 before cancelling programs.

Before Wagner got down to business, he asked everyone to share where they were tuning in from, along with their favorite aspect of Deer Hill.

Staff responses were overwhelmingly similar — anecdotes about the meaning that the work gave them and how much they loved the community.

"I'm truly missing you all and happy to see your faces," instructor Sam Ryden said from the driver's seat of a car, the evening light fading in the background.

Even through phones and computers with thousands of miles

between them, the closeness of this outdoor-focused community was evident.

Wagner, along with other administrative staff, worked hard to craft several drafts of COVID policy and guidelines. They consulted with other organizations like NOLS and Outward Bound, along with the Center for Disease Control and the Asso-

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ciation for Experiential Education, one of the outdoor industry's first accrediting bodies that helped create standards for professional and safe outdoor education practices.

Everyone adapted and planned for the 2021 season. Staff echoed each other in their support and optimism.

Back in Albuquerque, while Formosa, Ringer and their students waited for brownies to bake, Formosa asked students to share one thing they're grateful for and a highlight from the outdoor education program. "You can lick the bowl while we share," Ringer added.

"I never bake," one student said. "It's a really cool experience."

Many students shared a similar highlight from the outdoor program, the time that was spent "doing," rather than sitting and listening or watching — highlighting activities where they were physically interactive in their online world.

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ABOVE: Outdoor educators Danielle Formosa (left) and Hannah Siler (right).