

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Expeditionary Learning," by April Lewandowski, 10/1/98

Kudos to April Lewandowski for reminding us of the metaphorical connection between outdoor adventure and learning. At WCU, however, the connection is more literal than at other universities, and it is related to our twin bugaboos of recruitment and retention. What makes WCU unique is not the pedagogical brilliance of the faculty or even our "most wired" status; it is our location. Now that ASU has all the charm of a suburban strip mall, WCU is alone among the colleges among the UNC system in offering students a mountain environment for work and play.

Please forgive the cliché, but it is simply true that our location is at once our strongest asset and our greatest liability. Some students will hate WCU no matter how great their teachers, how many books in the library, and how friendly the campus cops. They will always feel that they are out in the boondocks--and, let's face it--they are. These students will transfer or drop out at the first opportunity. On the other hand, there are ample numbers of high school seniors who would relish four years at a campus with a half dozen whitewater rivers and one of the best mountain biking trail systems in the East within a hour's drive, enough hiking trails to satisfy the most diehard hiker, and a stocked trout stream flowing in front of the administration building.

More importantly, students who are attracted to WCU because of our location rather than in spite of it will tend to stay. Students in our programs in parks and recreation and in natural resources management, for example, seldom transfer despite the fact that both programs have nearly 100 majors and only 2 full time faculty members. We have simply missed the boat by not targeting prospective students who are oriented toward outdoor recreational activities and environmental studies.

The university could also do considerably more to promote outdoor adventure experiences among students already here, making them more likely to stay at WCU. This message is not lost on our competitors; Appalachian State has mountain biking and paddling clubs, UNC-Charlotte built a high ropes course on campus and developed a special outdoor adventure program oriented specifically to new freshmen, UNC-A has weekly kayak rolling sessions in their pool throughout the academic year. The outdoor program committee at LMP does a terrific job with the limited resources available to them. But, the historic division between the Offices of Student Development and of Academic Affairs impedes sharing of resources and works against a philosophy in which the sort of education outdoor activities that April describes can become an integrated component of each student's overall college experience.

That we have not successfully capitalized on our surroundings as recruiting and retention tools may be due, in part, to the fact that few of our faculty members and administrators are from the region. Indeed, many seem oblivious to or even embarrassed by the rural Appalachian geographic and cultural resources staring us in the face. Are we missing the forest for the trees?

Hal Herzog, Psychology

April's use of expeditionary learning is a great example of how we can use our "sense of place" here at Western. The General Education Committee is using the term "sense of place" and it is probably a key in looking at the future success of WCU.

Let's capitalize on our "sense of place" as it will surely aid in retention efforts. The "Expeditionary Learning" title that April used exudes a sense of outdoors which could be a large part of the sense of place of Western. We are in the mountains here and truly in the woods, but instead of apologizing for that we should capitalize on it; being in the woods is not a bad thing for certain populations. Some prospective students would have it no other way--to be in a secluded place in the mountains far from the bustle of the urban environment and close to some of the best outdoor recreation in the world. Capitalizing on this sense of place requires marketing,

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programming, and applying programs in ways that emphasize our sense of place, whether it be through outdoor recreation, scientific or artistic study of the Smokies, or the historical study of our heritage.

April's adaptation of Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound in her Freshman Composition course also happens to include another important issue for retention--the effective use of cooperative learning techniques. Having students work in groups is one thing; having them enjoy the experience and become highly functional is another. Succeeding in this kind of endeavor requires special tactics and techniques such as those used by April. With success, however, students then get to know each other in all courses and feel part of the class, department, and university. Then the students are less likely to leave for the less green pastures of the suburbs or the city. This kind of education needs to be established in Freshman Communities but then needs to be ongoing in the WCU community.

Real expeditions or experiences like ropes courses help develop group effectiveness, and we clearly have the terrain for such "expeditions," so let's catch up to App State and most other universities and build a ropes course to help the English Department and the rest of the university teach team work. Our sense of place should include wanting to work together in our unique environment. We might be high tech and we are in high country, but we must be high "touch" as well. A ropes course on campus would provide resources for developing the high touch and at the same time be clearly symbolic of a move in that direction.

So, let's look at that "sense of place" and if we can agree on what it is, let us capitalize on it with target marketing, appropriate programming, and creative teaching. April's use of the sense of place could be a catalyst for future developments that aid in retention.

Maurice Phipps, Health and Human Performance

April Lewandowski's creative application of "expeditionary" learning to composition seems an excellent model to accomplish what we want to do with learning communities and with the freshman seminar in the proposed general education revision. As a way of stretching one's capacities and yet becoming at home in the world, challenging one's assumptions and forming cooperative ties, having "wonderful ideas" and finding ways to make them reality, the Outward Bound model would seem to have many applications beyond the "ropes course" stereotype. It would seem to have the potential to ignite enthusiasm and commitment for the university, not to mention for the individuals involved. Where are the administrators who will take up this banner to make it happen? Do we have funds for vans and trainers? Is this the kind of thing FIPSE would like to fund--a joining of high tech, high touch, high country with a student-centered difference?

Elizabeth Addison, English

After spending three weeks this summer at the Alaska Institute of the Bread Loaf School of English, I believe in expeditionary learning. My class was called "Writing and the Sense of Place," and my professor, John Elder, believed in exploring a place. We traipsed through old growth forests, slogged through the muskeg, and waded through the intertidal zone. And wrote. And wrote more. At the end of the three weeks, my classmates and I polished our final portfolios, and I was struck by the overwhelming depth of the writing as well as the undercurrent of physicality holding the writing together. Sweat, mud, and mosquito bites combined with ink and paper simply created eloquent and powerful writing.

Granted, my class in Alaska focused on the landscape and our participation within it, but the underlying lesson is the need for a physical element to be brought to composition. And the beauty of April Lewandowski's "Expeditionary Learning" is her effort to add that physical element to the abstract tendencies of composition classrooms. After all, the writing process is inherent in all

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students. Whether we decide to guzzle huge mugs of beer at Colima's, to hike the trail to Cold Mountain, or to ask someone on a date, we have gathered data, analyzed the data, and acted on the data. This is a rather abstract and boring definition of the writing process. However, we all know writing can be exciting, especially when we discover the nucleus of a poem hidden in a journal entry, create new thoughts about a work of literature or ourselves, or connect with our peers through common experiences scribbled on a page. Expeditionary learning adds a needed physical aspect to the mental tendencies of writers. Writers are encouraged to risk more when writing is compared to rock climbing, kayaking, or backpacking. And I firmly believe that writing is closely connected to physical activity. Expeditionary learning explores these connections and makes writing real.

Jimmy Guignard, English

Many thanks for "Expeditionary Learning." It was most interesting and an apparently meaningful learning experience for the students.

Myron Coulter, Chancellor Emeritus