



Adventure Leadership Immersion Experience in Nature (A.L.I.E.N.)

Wingate University
Collaborative for the Common Good
Dr. Chris Harrist and Dr. Nick DeLangie

Working with Brad Turley began by realizing that there was a real connection between the space, resource conversation, people, leadership, and serving the community. The ALIEN program began as an experiment on how we could use natural landscapes to improve the lives of the people inhabiting this space. We landed on bringing in a diverse cross-section of college students from Wingate University to lead them through a transformative leadership experience away from technology, media, and traditional comforts to allow their natural sense of teamwork, communication, and leadership to emerge. It was a space where they can immerse themselves in nature and then ‘think’ and ‘do’ -- together.

The ALIEN program is how Wingate University has partnered with Brad Turley of Southern Eighths Farm to provide a non-traditional laboratory of difference making for students. The conceptual framework comes from the need to bring students into nature to develop certain critical leadership character traits through engagement with and within the natural environment.



WHY NATURE?

- Physical and psychological health benefits
- Steep decline in engagement with nature due to increase in screen time and sedentary lifestyles among young adults
- Influencing a conservation/preservation mindset

WHY LEADERSHIP?

- Untaught in typical college curriculum
- Valuable life skill for virtually any career or life path
- Creates community leaders to spread positive character traits among the community

After conducting a prototype ALIEN one-day program in Fall 2019, 18 students in Dr. Harrist's Community and Commercial Recreation Programming course (CCR 212 Spring 2020) developed possible ALIEN programming models as part of their learning outcomes for their class.



HOW?

- Identification of most desired competencies
- Conducting target-marking of Wingate Students
- Developing research-based targeted outcomes
- Analysis and operationalization of long-term goals

IDEAS TO DATE FROM STUDENTS:

- Wilderness Escape Room
- Leadership Training Course Site
- Biological Surveying

The PILOT

In the pilot program, seven students from Wingate University volunteered to participate in a leadership development experience held entirely in nature at the Southern Eighths Farm in Chesterfield, SC. The farm, owned by Brad Turley, is approximately 1500 acres of untouched, undeveloped land. Historically, this land dates to the early 1800's and was a critical position in the Civil War. Along with the seven students was Dr. Nick DeLangie, Dr. Chris Harrist, Dr. Wright, Mr. Brad Turley, and Mr. David Harper. The students were briefed on the history of the property along with some of Mr. Turley's philosophies on leadership and nature.



The experience began with a hike across the property to an open field where a local arrowhead collector spoke to students about the history of native American tribe life and showed them the age and history of the arrowheads found scattered on the ground. From there, the group split up



and only Dr. DeLangie, and Mr. Harper continued the program with the students. DeLangie served as the adventure leadership guide while Harper served as the expert naturalist providing insight into local plant and animal species.

The first objective was to use a satellite map of the property and practice observational cartography to plot a route. The students did this in groups of three and four. They used



magnetic needle compasses and found their bearing between plotted points which were marked with orange marking tape. While on this hike, Harper identified plants which were edible, those that were poisonous, and those that were non-native species to the area.

Student Reflection

I FEEL TOTALLY TRANSFORMED AS A PERSON

Once the group reached a dense grouping of pine forest, they were given instructions on how to make a debris hut shelter. Their instructions were intentionally minimal to give the students room to experiment, make mistakes, and learn the best way to build a shelter which would house their group for at least 24 hours. Each group was given just 30 minutes to complete the task. They divided jobs, assigned each other roles and accomplished the task in time.



After building the debris hut the students returned to the conference center to reflect on their tasks and experiences in a large group setting. Each student was asked to share their insights and reflect on the challenges they encountered in the tasks. The students then ate lunch and prepared for the afternoon session. Once lunch was complete the students took a pad of paper and drawing utensils out into the woods to be alone in nature.

They were instructed to sit apart from one another, take time to reflect on what they saw, learned, and felt during their morning in nature, and then draw their surroundings using art



paper and pastels. The students had 30 minutes to complete this task. Once they were finished, they brought their works of art back to the group and presented, one at a time, to the others. Their conversation was to describe their artwork and how their reflections were represented. The others in the group were encouraged to ask questions and dive deeper into the reflection. The ensuing conversation was inspirational and insightful.



Finally, the facilitators conducted a brief exit survey of the group to elicit feedback on the impact of the day, what worked well and what did not work, and what the participants would have changed.

The COURSE

Following the pilot event and as a result of mutual interest between the Collaborative for the Common Good and the Southern Eighths Farm to continue developing a transformative experience, a special topics course was designed by Drs. Harrist and DeLangie to provide students with an opportunity to develop a full outdoor immersion program designed to meet targeted outcomes. Students in the course self-selected into groups of three to four and had several tasks to perform:

- 1) Understanding the target market of the ALIEN program: the student-programmers researched their colleagues to better understand psychographic variables (e.g., needs, wants, desires) as well as the most desired competencies that are most deficient in college students. Through their efforts, the student-programmers discovered that most college students would prefer an experience that is, above all, *enjoyable*. More specifically, a program that effectively balanced challenge and skill (i.e., Theory of Flow) through immersive, engaging activities. Research also revealed four key ultimate outcomes:

Communication
Creativity
Collaboration
Leadership

- 2) **Creation of Outcomes to Reflect the Four Key Ultimate Outcomes:** The student-programmers then used logic modeling to deconstruct the competencies of communication, creativity, collaboration, and leadership into distal and proximal outcomes.

Student Reflection

THIS WAS THE BEST CLASS EVER! I WANT TO BE A FACILITATOR
FOR LIFE

- 3) **Creation of Outcome Based Programming:** Each group was then tasked with creating a three-day event that utilized outcome-based programming, combining intentionality with best practices in facilitation. To help in their understanding of the project and get a firsthand account of the property, the student-programmers were invited to visit the





Southern Eighths Farm during class time. The class met briefly with Mr. Turley to understand his desires for the program, as a requirement of their class project was to consider all stakeholder groups and make certain their needs were met. Dr. DeLangie then led the class on a brief hike to introduce the student-programmers to the land and get a better understanding of the physical resources at their

disposal. Through guided discussions and workshop sessions, each group developed a full, three-day experience for the student colleagues.

- 4) **Distilling a Final Program from all the Student Generated Possibilities:** After project proposals were submitted, Drs. Harrist and DeLangie evaluated each program and selected what they felt were the best components of each.

- 5) **Final Phase of Design:** For the final phase the groups were assigned specific elements of the program plan to fully develop into our proposed protocol. Areas of responsibility included activity blocks, reflective readings, mealtimes, competency build-up events, arrival/dismissal, self-actualization sessions, and the culminating event.



The RESULT

We have developed a process-centered, outcomes-based program that has carefully considered its participants as well as its stakeholders and delivers an immersive and transformative experience. In addition, the student-programmers, as members of the course, have engaged in their own program. Through their completion of the semester long project, the student-programmers have engaged in communication, creativity, collaboration, and leadership. And like our desire for the participants of the ALIEN program, the class was unaware they were engaged in a carefully developed and intentionally targeted program. They were simply immersed and engaged in an enjoyable (at least we hope) experience designing a program that will provide benefits for the participants as well as for community partners and stakeholders.

