



The Value of an Outdoor Education Experience

► **Cheryl B. Torsney**, associate provost for academic programs and professor of English, West Virginia University

Last summer I took five days to travel to Dolly Sods, a wilderness area in the Allegheny National Forest, with one of my institution's sixteen summer excursions designed to introduce first-year students to institutional expectations, campus culture, study skills, other students, and themselves. Doing without cell phones—let alone restroom facilities—was a real challenge for these twenty soon-to-be freshmen on my Adventure West Virginia backpacking trip. But they not only managed, they came out of the woods stronger people and more serious about their education. We even have the data to prove it.

In our drive to educate our students for the real world by providing internships, undergraduate STEM research experiences, and high-tech opportunities for learning, such as Second Life and podcasts, we have somehow forgotten the educational potential of our backyards. We implement recycling programs and construct buildings with green roofs, but neglect to educate our students about the out-of-doors. Why? Outdoor education doesn't have to be terribly expensive. It's a "green" activity. And travel and tourism is an exciting industry that offers jobs for recent college graduates—especially, perhaps, for those liberal arts majors with an interdisciplinary bent of thought.

Perhaps the promise of outdoor education has yet to be realized because the generation of students we teach—and their parents—has yet to see its value. These Millennial kids need constant stimulation: they have been brought up on television with frequent commercial breaks and films with so many jump cuts I get woozy; they use cell phones, play video games, and instant message 24/7. Nearly all of their preferred activities happen inside. Common neighborhood green space has all but disappeared, and kids who grow up in suburban McMansions don't play hide-and-seek or capture the flag the way we did. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv explains that our children suffer from what he calls "Nature-Deficit Disorder."

I learned from my wilderness backpacking with first-year students that they are afraid of the woods. They are terrified by both bugs and bears; they are leery of camp cuisine; and they are revolted by performing one's morning ablutions in the out-of-doors. As young adults, jaded in many ways, they also display a refreshing and childlike fascination with dew-laden early-morning spider webs, wild blueberries,

and successfully digging and using a latrine. To become a member of the "Order of the Shovel" is a high honor indeed. With no cell phone service and nothing but the stars and a campfire to distract them, these students open up about their fears about starting college. Most of them are more worried that they won't find friends than that they won't be able to succeed academically. They fret about being away from their families. Around the campfire, we talk to them very frankly about the risks of alcohol abuse and how dangerous the first six weeks of school are, especially for young women. Student assistants relate personal stories that make me cringe: stories about waking up in an emergency room after having been treated for alcohol poisoning, stories about attempted rape. In their tents, on a rock in a creek with their feet dangling in the water, out in an open field during a solo hike, these backpackers write in their journals, plumbing their souls.

Talk about bonding—together the students learn about the natural history of the area they're backpacking through and simultaneously traverse the territory of their hearts. They form support groups that last. As a result, students who experience these outdoor adventures are retained from first to second year at a higher rate than students who do not go into the woods or on other nature adventures such as caving, rock climbing, and white-water rafting.

Ralph Waldo Emerson would have agreed that we need to reconsider the importance of outdoor education. In "The American Scholar" (1837), he explains: "The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. . . The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle." The section concludes: "[I]n fine, the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."

I would not argue that we do not need to offer high-tech classrooms, online opportunities, and updated residence halls. I'm not so sure those residence halls need movie channels, however. I'm more convinced that if the residents of those halls spent some quality time outside experiencing nature and looking inside themselves, they might learn far more than they could from an umpteenth viewing of *Die Hard III* or *Legally Blonde*. ■