ON A BRIGHT August day, a select group of Honors students and faculty gathered at the South Rim's Mather Campground, soon to become a tight-knit community devoted to an entire semester of place-based, experiential learning. That late summer day marked the beginning of Northern Arizona University's Grand Canyon Semester (GCS), the third to be offered through a joint partnership of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Northern Arizona University (NAU) and Grand Canyon National Park.

Grand Canyon Semesters are integrated learning experiences in the humanities and sciences. Using an interdisciplinary approach, students study the environmental and social challenges confronting us in the 21st century. Students, many of whom had never seen the Grand Canyon before, examined and charted water's economic, political, artistic, ecological, social, and spiritual forces in both the classroom and the field focusing specifically on the greater Grand Canyon Region. This semester's experience proved to be an exciting and educational journey for the participants, who now better understand why the protection of our beautiful and fragile Canyon is so important.

The semester began with a week of orientation on the South Rim. Students explored the park and engaged in discussions and talks given by Park Superintendent Dave Uberuaga and other park representatives, facilitated by Park educators Jacob Fillion and Megan Kohli. GCS faculty introduced students to park management, anthropology, history, geology and environmental topics. A highlight of orientation week was a barbeque at Shoshone Point, where renowned artist Bruce Aiken shared his inspirations about the painting the Canyon against the backdrop of a Grand Canyon sunset.

During the semester, students enrolled in courses covering Grand Canyon geology, anthropology, policy, ecology, and art and literature. They traveled to the Hopi and the Navajo reservations, nearby national monuments and other locations in the Park and on the Plateau where they heard from stakeholders who shared cultural, scientific and personal perspectives about water and its relationship to the greater Grand Canyon region. Students participated in service projects in the Park throughout the semester as well.

In particular, two field experiences made a dramatic impact on students. One was a multi-day stay at Kane Ranch in House Rock Valley, hosted by Grand Canyon Trust. Using the ranch as a base camp for four days, they visited the North Rim and the condor release site on the Paria Plateau, where Peregrine Foundation Condor Project coordinator, Chris Parish, talked to them about re-introduction of this magnificent bird. They also toured Glen Canyon Dam, listening to the Bureau of Reclamation's perspective on Colorado River management. Roger Clark of Grand Canyon Trust discussed uranium mining on the Plateau, and students and faculty debated a myriad of...
park management issues during their time at Kane.

Students also rafted the Colorado, sponsored by Grand Canyon National Park, and were kept busy during the day with river lessons and in the evening during in-camp discussions. They were presented with field lessons like "A Day in the Sandals" at Unkar Delta and "Grocery-Shopping in the Wilderness" at Saddle Canyon and pulled camelthorn and Russian thistle from camping beaches. One rainy afternoon at the Confluence students stood with their toes in the Little Colorado and learned about the controversial Escalade Tramway Development, debating its pros and cons. They hiked side canyons, heard stories about Canyon explorers, snapped countless photographs, rowed rapids, journaled, sketched and described as "magical" and "life-changing." Many hoped to return as river guides, ecologists and activists. The group found themselves back on campus experiencing post-river trip blues and longing for the river, having made a powerful connection that they will never forget.

The semester finished with an academic symposium at NAU, where formal research projects were presented on relevant topics ranging from Katie Lee to the public’s involvement in the stakeholder process to coal mining on the Colorado Plateau. Bruce Aiken generously donated his studio space during December’s First Friday Art Walk in Flagstaff for an end of semester celebration highlighting the students’ remarkable creativity. Paintings, ammo can art, sketches, songs, poetry and spoken word readings, all inspired by the Canyon, were shared with the Flagstaff community.

NAU’s Grand Canyon Semester was a resounding success. Students made lifelong friends and incorporated life-changing experiences through this place-based experiential learning curriculum. They left with a new-found passion for the Canyon and a deeper understanding of the need for protection of the greater Grand Canyon region that they promised to share with their own communities as they returned home.

For more information about Grand Canyon Semester, visit http://nau.edu/honors/gcs/.

Robyn S. Martin

On The Eddy Line

I have been moving fast, for a long time now. So fast that I don’t even remember which way the bow was facing when the river’s tongue swept me up or what my plan had been when I was standing at the edge, scouting the rapid. I’m in an eddy now and my heart is still beating but I’m not looking upstream or listening for the roar of the next wave train, I’m letting the gentle force of the contradicting waters hypnotize me. I’m embracing this stillness and for the first time in a long time, I feel the depth and potential of the water. Like every moment, this one is a culmination of all the ones before it—the series of damp winters I spent in the Northwest, the voice of Edward Abbey sneaking in the seams of my environmental policy classes, the weeks I spent in the back of my father’s land cruiser searching out the most beautiful and remote places on the map—and my deep-rooted sense of adventure that is the product of all these moments. It is these experiences and everything in-between that flow beneath me, but it is the endless contortion of the canyon walls that carry the river around the next bend and bring light to new shade and perspective—the catalyst for my own intellectual and emotional development. It is through my peers’ unique perspectives of this region, the integration of fundamentally different but interwoven academic discussions and the knowledge that my time in this region will expand beyond the parameters of this semester, that my own connection to this place has been rejuvenated and enhanced.

There is a beauty in discovery that I feel unable to put words to, but it is a beauty that I seek out above all else. It is the joy I felt when my plane landed in Portland for the first time or when later that year the leaves on the trees were suddenly orange—and then one day
there were no leaves at all. It’s the beauty I found at
the top of Volcan Tajamulco as the full moon caused
clouds to cast shadows over Guatemala City—it’s that
feeling you get when you realize there is still so much
you don’t know. As I drove Interstate 17 from Tucson
to Flagstaff, I didn’t feel any of that—the newness, the
discovery, the excitement. I drove through expansive
desert quickly and mindlessly and the brush turned
to pine in the same place that it always does. I held
on the anticipation of meeting new friends and discover-
ing their stories. In retrospect, it was probably right
then that my momentum began to slow but I didn’t
really feel the change in pace until the next day when
we arrived at Shoshone Point. I left distracted foot-
prints in the sand as I stepped out of my life and into
the Canyon’s magnetic field. It was not my first time
looking out onto the raw buttes and into the depths
of the inner gorge, but it was the first time I felt a pull
so strong I couldn’t move. I attribute the magnitude
of the experience partly to my own state of mind but
more than anything I think I was feeling the reverence
of those around me. I realized that I only represented
a fraction of the lenses through which the canyon was
being viewed—Deana from Arkansas, Solaine from
New York, Kyle from Florida and all the rest—they
brought their own histories and their own stories and
because of that, the filters in their eyes saw hues in the
rock that I only hoped to discover.

I spent a lot of time alone that night, grounding
myself in place and imagining the Colorado River
roaring through what seemed to be the center of the
earth. I imagined what it must be like to arrive here
from Pennsylvania, like Madeline had or from Geo-
ria, like Clara. I imagined that they might feel like I
had when I saw the Teton Mountain Range in Wy-
oming for the first time or when I finally dipped my
toes in the Atlantic Ocean. I realized that their discov-
ery of this place was allowing me to rediscover it and
to look at it in ways that hadn’t occurred to me before.
Bruce Aiken, Grand Canyon artist, leant another
perspective, one that was in stark contrast to my own
and to my peers who were just seeing this canyon for
the first time. Bruce spent a significant portion of his
life in the canyon, where he lived in a cabin at Roar-
ing Springs and supplied Phantom Ranch with water
for thirty years. As he explained it, pumping water
was simply a means to living the life he wanted. Bruce
recalls arriving at the Grand Canyon for the first time
and feeling so drawn in by its power that he never
wanted to leave, and so he found a way to stay. Bruce’s
paintings and words are a reflection of a thoughtful
and intimate relationship with the canyon—and like
my peers, Bruce brought to light colors that my filter
hadn’t seen before. In that moment, the panorama
in front of me became a multi-exposure image and
the canyon’s possibilities seemed endless. I realized
that whether you’d never seen the Canyon before or
you’d spent your life living in it; all eyes see different
shape and different color and that the beauty and the
wonder of the canyon was enhanced for me when I in-
corporated all those varying perspectives into my own.
The emotional connection I feel to this land has
made me highly receptive to the wide range of aca-
demic perspectives that I am offered in the Grand
Canyon Semester. Learning about the canyon from
many different angles has started to build a framework
for which my intellectual and emotional understand-
ing can come together and grow. I’ve been an engaged
student for fifteen years, but never has an academic
setting reciprocated the inquiry and analysis that I’ve
brought forth—until now. I’m discovering this symbi-
otic relationship between ecology and people that yes,
I’ve always known about, but never really understood.
I’m learning that contradictory to the fact that water
pours from my tap today, the Colorado’s dwindling
flow of water cannot keep pace with the region’s
demands. I’m starting to understand how the scarcity
of water in this region minimizes primary produc-
tion, leaving this ecosystem with just a few key species
and how that plays a role in a 12,000 year old culture’s
ability to develop distinct and flexible adaptations
to this region. It is through integrative analysis and
application of these fundamental ideas that I am able
to better understand the roles that water plays in the
southwest. By looking at this region through various
lenses, I am forced to ask questions like “what is my
role in this relationship?” and rather than answers, I’m
provided with experience, through which I am slowly
but surely responding to my own questions.

The real benefit of this semester, and maybe just ex-
periential education in general, is that classroom dis-
cussions and ideas are easily facilitated in the field. As
we rise in elevation towards the San Francisco Peaks I
notice the transformation as ponderosa pine forest be-
comes mixed conifer forest, an ecological segregation
that Merriam categorized as his ‘Life Zone Theory’.And then, as the air gets warmer as we drive away from
the peaks towards the Navajo Reservation, I recognize
Hopkin’s “Biclimatic Law” as I return my fleece to my
backpack. After a weekend of exposure to the reality
of desert agriculture and a community’s reliance on
infrequent precipitation, I run up and down the Hopi
Mesa as a part of a culture that is deeply rooted in the
idea of “Paatuwaqatsi”—the bond of water, land and
life. It is these moments, when I’m out in the world
living what I learn that I feel most present and engaged
in the transformation that this experience is facilitating.

In December, when all but one of my peers pack up their things and leave the Colorado Plateau for their respective homes, I will remain here—in this place I know so deeply. I believe that knowing this has motivated me to be slow and thoughtful in my learning of this region. It is propelling me to create a three-dimensional and tangible map of my surroundings and to fill in the spaces with a blend of my intellect and emotion. I have not lived in a lot of places, but I have traveled enough to be able to make a clear distinction between my experiences here thus far and my experiences in other places I’ve been—one is so much richer than the other. The first history teacher I ever had quoted Wallace Stegner on our first day of class; she said, “if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.” I think I was born with an innate appreciation for place that allowed me to initially understand what Stegner was talking about, but until recently I don’t think I would have been able to articulate how that appreciation is significant in my life. Through familiarizing myself with some of the big environmental, cultural, social and even economic conditions that make this region unique, I have a renewed sense of value for the spirit of this place that will radiate far beyond the expiration of this semester.

Moving quickly is an efficient way to scan the surface and catch the big waves, but what I’m discovering is that sometimes the learning doesn’t really happen until you’re caught in an eddy and forced to really study the waters before you make your next move. And if you’re lucky enough to have one partner, or twelve, try on their glasses and view the water through the varying prescriptions—I can guarantee you that you’ll find patterns and paths you didn’t see before and that when you finally make it down the river, you won’t ever see or experience it the same again.

Ariel Weiner

Looking Downriver From Here

The pontoons are aired up and lashed on
And now there is time to catch my breath and look around.
I eat an apple in the back of the raft and watch AZRA
Rig their fleet. Oars, straps, coolers and 20 mils scattered
Across the gravel river bank.

It will be good to be downriver again.
Where Navajo Tapestry adorns the cliff walls
Like Rosh Hashanah faces.

Boatmen from three different commercial companies and
Two private trips wander the gravel beach. We wear sandals,
Faded hats, holey t-shirts. Two of us have pliers on our belts.

At the far end of the beach a private trip is rigging their
Rafts. Offloading, ammo cans, coolers and produce from
The back of a truck. Five kayaks—two yellow, three red—
Sit with their tails in the river, their noses on the beach.

Yes, it’s good to be going downriver again.
Where the bighorns gather
Where the ravens always watch
Where the Owl Eyes never close.

The Kolbs, the Sandersons, the Poulpons
Have stood right here on this gravel bank and rigged their
Boats, embellished their stories, perfected their oars.
I wonder, did a feather of exhilaration tickle their adrenal gland as it does mine, when they shoved their boats off
The bank?

There is a feeling, I get every time I’m here that I’ve been trying
To define. What is it? Now, halfway through my second season
I think I’ve at last defined it. That I’m a seeker, and now I can feel
A determined finger pushing me into fertile soil?

As day passes into darkness swimmers and boatmen gather
Together on an AZRA boat and blow the devil from the bottle.
The runs though Horseshoe, Hance and Lava Falls are never
So bold, so brave as when told here in this liar’s cathedral.

I eat my apple.
I look, downriver.
I wonder where this river will take me?

— STEVEN WESLEY LAW