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Students in the Outdoor Leadership program at Central Oregon Community College do some winter camping as part of their education.

Mapping a future through the mountains

COCC's Outdoor Leadership program blends self-reliance, technical skills and citizenship

Early last spring, out on the late-season snowpack that glazed the Three Sisters Wilderness, a group of a dozen backcountry skiers had toured in for a weeklong expedition. The guides had pitched camp and were working hard to set the tone, whipping up that trusty elixir of enthusiasm and organization that keeps trips humming. The food was on-point, the itinerary dialed-in. All in all, a textbook day for mountain guides.

Happiest of all was Tim Peterson, associate professor of the Outdoor Leadership program at Central Oregon Community College, acting as an observer and consultant for the group. In fact, the "expedition" wasn't really a paid expedition at all, but rather a simulated ski trip comprised entirely of his students, most playing the part of guests.

"By lunchtime, I had this thought — I don't need to be here," Peterson recalled. "They're so into it."

Getting students to that place — where interpersonal ease, strong leadership qualities, outdoor ethics and technical know-how all run seamlessly together — is the mission of COCC's Outdoor Leadership program, the oldest program of its kind in the state.

Designed in the cohort style, the training starts in the fall and takes place over three successive terms. It's open to 24 students, who often split into two groups of 12 for activities. This tight-knit size fosters teamwork while allowing for personal growth. Students lean on each other, they lift each other up, endure together, explore together.

The cohort phase is combined with a year's worth of prerequisite studies — completed in advance — to earn an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree, one of COCC's more popular and versatile degrees. Students go from learning algebra one year to alpine climbing the

next. It makes for a well-rounded, rigorous model.

When the cohort first gets underway, they gather everyday — rain or shine or pumping-down snow — on a woody ridge beyond the library on the Bend campus. Here, in the "outdoor classroom," amid a small clearing ringed with young conifers, a portable whiteboard is the only hint of a traditional classroom.

The curriculum immerses students in subjects like ecology, resource management and risk psychology. They learn how to facilitate group experiences, how to survive in the wilds and how to administer first aid in the backcountry. Some options allow for a specialty focus, on, say, teaching rock climbing or leading mountain bike trips.

Students get their first taste of being true leaders at a weeklong outdoor school for local elementary schoolkids at Shevlin Park. It requires devising classes and managing the school, with basic ecology and Leave No Trace themes as the primary lesson plans.

Excursions, of course, are instrumental to the program. These include the mock expedition — where students make the itinerary, take care of the logistics and manage the group — plus a full billing of outdoor trips. At places like Todd Lake and Meadow Camp, they'll practice paddling techniques, study avalanche zones and deploy climbing anchors. Ongoing discussions on things like wilderness ethics and land stewardship are threads that continually run through the lessons.

The hands-on, out-in-the-elements aspect of the education has a way of connecting with students.

"I'm not really a school person," shared Evonne "Vonny" Dobson, on a recent bright spring day at the outdoor classroom. "I never really knew what experiential learning was."

The program, she discov-

ered, was a way to bring out her strengths, help her succeed. She's now considering recreational therapy as a career path.

Most graduates, according to Peterson, launch straight into careers with entry-level positions (though for some, this a second or even third career). For this year's students, those opportunities include working for the U.S. Forest Service, Zion National Park, Bend Park & Recreation District and guiding rafters down Pennsylvania's turbulent Lehigh River. The ability to travel and take on new challenges seems to rank high among grads.

So does making a difference in the world.

Up in Wrangell, Alaska, Jonas Crabtree works as an expedition coordinator for a wilderness therapy program. Crabtree finished the COCC program in 2014, went on to earn his bachelor's degree from OSU-Cascades, and now oversees intensive, two-month oceangoing canoe voyages.

"We are a big team with one mission — helping youth succeed," he said. "It's challenging, yet rewarding."

That theme is inextricably linked to the outdoor ed world — it has such transformative powers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF COCC

Students can learn to rock climb in the Outdoor Leadership program.

OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP

For more details on Outdoor Leadership at COCC, visit cocc.edu or contact the Crook County Open Campus at 541-447-9233.

Kelsie Meithof, a new grad, discovered that the physical and mental hurdles of the program helped her push aside her anxiety issues and persevere.

"The Outdoor Leadership program is unique because it isn't just about learning things," she explained. "The program is about learning yourself."

For these outdoor leaders, the skills they build and the strengths they harness will stand them in good stead on any mountain ledge — real or symbolic — that they encounter in life. It's an expedition of a lifetime.

Written by Mark Russell Johnson, COCC College Relations.

Dates to remember

June 25

COCC summer term begins

July 4

COCC campus closed

July 11

COCC placement test

July 19

Financial aid advisor available at the Prineville campus

July 25

COCC placement test

Upcoming classes

July 21

BASIC PHOTOGRAPHY

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Are you new to digital photography? Gain an understanding of what makes a good picture and how to take one regardless of what type of camera you use. This class is intended for photographers who have cameras with automatic settings. Learn camera basics, lighting, key shooting techniques and much more from a professional photographer. Bring your camera and user's manual. Cost: \$99.

July 23-26

MAKE YOUR FIRST VIDEO GAME YOUTH CAMP

9 a.m.-noon

If you love playing video games, this is the camp for you! Make your first video game in this one-of-a-kind class that shows you the keys to designing your first 2D platformer game. Conceptualization, play experience, level design, graphics, sounds, and simple coding are just some of the concepts that will be explored. No prior experience necessary, just a desire to have fun. Student-created games will be available on a password-protected Black Rocket website to share with friends and family. For students ages 10-14. Cost: \$199. Full and partial scholarships are available.

August 13-16

DESSERTS FIRST BAKING & PASTRY YOUTH CAMP

Wednesdays 1-4 p.m.

9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Enjoy a sweet week filled with cakes, cookies, chocolate and more. Students will learn the secrets and techniques of the bakeshop and produce restaurant-quality desserts, ranging from "exotic" pastries to special decorative cakes. Future pastry chefs will create a special dessert buffet presentation for two guests to sample the week's efforts on the last day. Mandatory Cascade Culinary Institute chef coat is not included (additional \$30). For students ages 10-14. Cost: \$229. Full and partial scholarships are available.

Public Computer Access

Monday through Thursday: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m.

Saturdays: 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.

All events will be held at the COCC Crook County Open Campus unless otherwise noted. Call 541-447-9233 for more information and to register.

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