

The Fourth R of Education RIVER

By Chad Osborne

Photo by Lora Gordon

When three faculty members and six students embarked on an eight-day journey on the New River, they made one rule: no complaining.

It wasn't easy.

There were flips, spills and splashes. There was canoeing across the river in the dark. There was a mile-and-a-half stretch of river that was nearly dry, forcing the adventurers to drag, tug and pull over rugged rocks and through mud, their red canoes and rafts containing hundreds of pounds of equipment – food, tents, sleeping bags, et cetera.

Still, no one complained. That was the rule.

"There were plenty of things to complain about, like the weather, minor injuries and how tired we all were. No one did, though," said student participant Lindsey Faulkner.

"Dragging the raft through shallow areas was very hard and strenuous, but everyone throughout the whole trip had the notion that this was going to be a good week whether we pulled the raft the whole 70 miles or not."

In September, Radford University parks, recreation and tourism Assistant Professor Josh Carroll and English Professor Rick Van Noy led a small group of students through the Semester on the New course, a newly created educational expedition in which the New River, from Radford to (almost) West Virginia, became the classroom.

"The course is an interdisciplinary field experience where students get to learn and live what we're teaching in the classrooms," Carroll explained. "It's an exceptional

collaborative effort between the faculty and the students. They have to give a lot for this. They leave everything behind, and we're all just a unit floating down the river for eight days."

Most of the six participating students – Richard Nielsen, Patrick Schrader, Makayla Beckner, Lindsay Stansfield, Lindsay Thompson and Lindsey Faulkner – were enrolled in a fall semester cluster of five classes that included critical thinking; religion; biology; Appalachian studies; and recreation, parks and tourism.

Students ditched pens for paddles, and doing homework meant setting up a campsite and cooking food for everyone.

"You get to know these students on such a different level than you do in the classroom," said Van Noy, an English professor. "Normally, I'm this guy in front of the classroom. But out there on the river, I'm paddling next to my students in a canoe. They were freer out there, and they asked questions. And, whatever curiosity they had, just came out. Whereas in the classroom they might think, 'OK, is this the appropriate time to ask that question?' Things became a lot more real."

Being out on the river, however, did not put the brakes on classroom responsibilities. One morning, biology Instructor Anthony Curtis met the group at their campsite for "water quality testing in the freezing cold water,"

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recalled Patrick Schrader, a sophomore geospatial sciences major from Stephens City. "This experience was not what I was expecting. It was much better."

The travelers met their share of adversity on the river, but they learned, gained confidence and bonded through the chaos. But, living on the water for a week wasn't all hard times; there were plenty of fun and interesting times, too.

For example, they spent the night on an island inhabited by goats; crossed the river in the dark; went fishing and observed eagles and osprey; participated in a drum circle with another group of college students they encountered on the river; and dined on locally sourced foods at an autumn harvest fest, where – ahem – goat was an appetizer.

"It's that kind of stuff that made it so cool," Carroll said. "You're never going to get anything like that in a regular classroom. You're never going to have those experiences with your student or your professor in a classroom."

The trip may have been a life-changer for some students, Van Noy said.

It was for Lindsay Stansfield. She was unsure about coming back to Radford for the 2015-16 school year until,

she said, "I received a slip of paper in the mail" about Semester on the New.

"I never thought that the river along the campus would have provided me with the journey I have always longed for, a journey of a lifetime on a beautiful river," Stansfield said. "It was a trip that I would have loved to last longer. I wouldn't have had it any other way, even with our struggles."

For Schrader, the experience was unlike any he'd had in a classroom.

"This trip really opened my eyes to how important it is for people, of any kind, to stop and appreciate life," he said. "That's what this trip was for me, an appreciation."

Carroll plans to offer Semester on the New again in the fall of 2017. Would these students do it again?

"Of course," Faulkner said.

"Every part of it," Schrader confirmed. "From hurting my leg dragging the raft on Tuesday and having problems with it for the rest of the time, to climbing a tree that had fallen in the middle of the river to its highest point and seeing one of the most breathtaking views I have had the privilege to see."

Yep, they would sign up again ... with no complaints. ■