"I Went To The Woods Because I Wished To Live Deliberately": How a College-Level Academic Course Can Influence a Lifetime

Lauren Elizabeth Victor
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Victor, Lauren Elizabeth, ""I Went To The Woods Because I Wished To Live Deliberately": How a College-Level Academic Course Can Influence a Lifetime" (2012). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 946.
https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/946
“I WENT TO THE WOODS BECAUSE I WISHED TO LIVE DELIBERATELY”:

HOW A COLLEGE-LEVEL ACADEMIC COURSE CAN INFLUENCE A LIFETIME

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Lauren E. Victor

August 2012

Advisor: Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher
ABSTRACT

This study, using the portraiture methodology, provides an analysis of the lifelong significance of an undergraduate program that integrates literature with an outdoor experiential platform. With limited research on long-term effects of an academic outdoor experiential course on one’s life, there is space to wonder about the prospect and nature of the long-term significance of an academic course that may offer technical skill, intrapersonal and interpersonal development, and also the delivery of subject matter related to a traditional or mainstream academic area of study.

Utilizing an academic skills-oriented lens as well as a character strengths lens, portraits were crafted of four former participants of the University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program (NELP) to shed light on the long-term influence of this type of course, crucial participant characteristics that contribute to the program’s impact, and specific components of the program that are particularly integral to the course’s efficacy. Since 1975, each spring term a small contingent of students and educators has lived in the woods in the New England region as a community of learners, artists and explorers. NELP is an exemplar of a longstanding undergraduate academic English course that integrates the literature of New England writers, exploratory writing and student experiences relating to regional literature and the land.
Emergent themes of this course’s long-term influence on former participants include increased collaborative skills, increased self-confidence and self-knowledge, a reinforcement of lifelong relationships with the outdoors, and nurtured creativity. For participants to reap benefit from this course, it was important for them to enter with maturity to conduct themselves with openness to new experiences, relationships, and extensive reflection. Findings relating to the integral components of such a program include that of being place-based, oriented towards process, and being an intentional, collaborative community.
Acknowledgements

While I have ultimately had to put the pen to paper, so to speak, this is a work that has had the support of many throughout the journey, and that of many more people than are mentioned specifically. This final disserting push was perhaps the steepest part of the climb, but it really was the entire doctoral process that has further developed me as a scholar and a human being. A deepest appreciation goes to the participants of this study, who have most graciously shared their own stories. Thank you to Aric Knuth for opening the door to this research on NELP, as well as to Dr. Nels Christensen and Rachael Cohen for not only sharing their perspectives, but for pushing me as an undergraduate and human being to roll over and live—this would be a very different dissertation without you, for reasons both past and present. I am grateful to my committee, Dr. Bruce Uhrmacher, Dr. Chris Linder and Dr. Frank Tuitt, for supporting my interests and my growth as a scholar. I am deeply thankful for the flexibility and support of my outside chair, Dr. Chuck Patti, as well as for Dr. Maria Riva’s openness and rock star troubleshooting skills. Without the immense support of my family, continuing the doctoral lineage would not have been made a reality. Jason, my partner in crime, has been most understanding of the neuroses that come with pursuing a Ph.D., as have dear friends who have been patient with my reclusiveness, especially in the home stretch. My dear colleagues, Shametrice, Tamara, Jennifer, Jennie and Karyn, among others, have played immeasurable roles in talking it out, editing, cheering one another on and making it all seem possible in the end. This has been a unique life experience and I truly am grateful to each of you with whom I have crossed paths along the way.
# Table of Contents

Preface ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Introduction .............................................................................................................. 3
  Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 3
  Statement of Problem ................................................................................................................ 4
  Purpose and Significance of Proposed Study ......................................................................... 5
  Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 7
  Defining Outdoor Experiential Education .............................................................................. 8
    Outdoor education .................................................................................................................. 8
    Experiential education .......................................................................................................... 10
    Outdoor experiential education ............................................................................................ 12
  Historical Background of Outdoor Experiential Education at the Postsecondary Level ... 13
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter Two: Literature Review .................................................................................................... 17
  Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 17
  Outdoor Experiential Programs in Higher Education .......................................................... 17
    Institutional recreation departments or clubs ................................................................. 18
    First-year wilderness orientation programs .................................................................... 20
    Degree programs .................................................................................................................. 24
    Academic courses for credit ............................................................................................... 25
    Exemplary practices in outdoor experiential programs in higher education. ............... 27
  The Impact of Outdoor Experiential Education on Learning and Personal Growth .......... 31
    Development of relationships and interpersonal skills ................................................. 31
    Development of outdoor technical skills and connection with the land .................... 34
    Improved aspiration and/or retention levels .................................................................. 37
    Increased self-knowledge and analytical skills ................................................................ 39
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 44

Chapter Three: Research Methodology & Design ...................................................................... 46
  Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 46
  Research Questions ................................................................................................................ 47
  The Portraiture Methodology ............................................................................................... 47
    Context ................................................................................................................................. 48
    Voice .................................................................................................................................. 48
    Relationships ...................................................................................................................... 49
    Emergent themes ............................................................................................................... 50
    Aesthetic whole .................................................................................................................. 50
  The Study Focus .................................................................................................................... 51
List of Tables

Table 1: Webb (2000) depiction of the stages of outdoor recreation program goals……18

Table 2: O’Keefe’s (1989) three models (from Curtis, 1999)……………………………….22

Table 3: Curtis’ (1999) vision for goals of today’s wilderness orientation programs……23

Table 4: Skill/Knowledge Development and Character Strength Development Frameworks……………………………………………………………………………………………………55

Table 5: Outline of this study’s participant characteristics…………………………………70
List of Figures

Figure 1: Baker's (2005) Landfull Framework, which guides meaningful experiences in outdoor-based programming.................................................................9

Figure 2: Kolb (1984) Experiential Learning Model.........................................11

Figure 3: Joplin's (1995) Experiential Education Model depicts a cyclical process......11

Figure 4: Sakofs & Armstrong's (1996) active learning cycle............................43
Preface

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (Thoreau, 1983, p. 135)

I suppose I could have chosen from a handful of words or quotes to inject into this dissertation’s title, and perhaps in a conventionally unconventional choice, I chose this string of words crafted by Thoreau. In doing so, I feel that an explanation is in order.

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) moved to a cabin he built at Walden Pond, near Concord Massachusetts. In simple terms, this was in part to remove himself from the distractions of mainstream society and have the opportunity to ruminate on and determine how he wished to live before falling into a mundane cycle of merely following actions without real meaning. During this two-year period he wrote a draft of Walden, an exploration of living life with intention, in a simplified way and as experienced close to the natural world. For him, this was an act of individualism, and while he does promote the virtues of living in certain ways, he also reiterates that everyone should personally experience and examine their own way of living.

In full disclosure, his cabin was in the woods just a couple of miles from town and he did receive visitors. At the time, he was also criticized by some of his contemporaries for experimenting with what was considered a more unusual lifestyle. And while the
New England Literature Program is not simply a Thoreauvian paradise, it does serve as an experiment for living. Removed from outside distractions, here is an opportunity for young adults to participate in a personal experiment with living and learning in previously unfamiliar ways, with the chance to examine what a well-lived life means to them. Simply put, these words of Thoreau seemed fitting for a dissertation that serves as an examination of this likeminded experiment of living and learning.
Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

American youth today often have a less intimate relationship with the natural world than generations past, spending less time outdoors than generations before them (Clements, 2004). Through outdoor education, individuals have the opportunity to “recognize the relationship between their existence and the natural environment...[and] become aware of the timelessness of the natural environment. This awareness gives them a reference point from which they see their temporary existence” (Taniguchi, Freeman, & Richards, 2005, p. 133). We have accepted a normative of certain schooling structures, such as, “the typical college classroom…stand and deliver environment that does not foster engagement, interaction or exchange” (McGuire, 2011), and tend to prompt passivity (Orr, 2004). As higher education professionals seek to impassion young people and enrich their connections to the world around them, by integrating outdoor experiential education into the student experience there is an opportunity to foster an understanding of themselves, others and their positioning within the larger world.

In recent years experiential education within the postsecondary sector has become increasingly accepted (Garvey, 2002); the integration of wilderness experiences into freshmen orientations, adventure education degrees and mainstream academics at the college level has also seen expansion. Related research tends to focus on the usage of
outdoor education in student orientation programs (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Fears, 2001; Lanza, 1998; Prussia & Weis, 2004). Furthermore, beyond orientation programs, as a part of mainstream academic coursework, outdoor experiential education can reach students in ways that are often inaccessible in more typical classroom-based courses, in part by addressing more kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, as well as through physical and emotional challenges (Taniguchi et al., 2005). Here is an opportunity to provide a place for different ways of learning and knowing, inclusive of many student learning needs that may not always be met by a student’s departmental norms, which can affect one’s adaptation or academic performance (Kolb, 1981).

Statement of Problem

With consideration to outdoor-based education at the postsecondary level in particular, there are still limitations to our knowledge. First, a deeper understanding of how outdoor experiential education affects or transforms, if at all, participants many years or decades later will benefit the field. Current research largely focuses on short-term consequences of outdoor experiential education and has found significant development and improvement of what often can be considered character-related skills and knowledge (e.g., Lanza, 1998; Shellman & Ewert, 2010; Sibthorp, 2003; Stott & Hall, 2003). The limited research focusing on relatively long-term effects of outdoor-based programs suggests similar findings (e.g., Daniel, 2003; Gass, Garvey & Sugerman, 2003).

In addition, it is important to understand why certain individuals are impacted in the long-term. A broad survey-based sample, for instance, would probably not do us
justice in understanding nuances of why, how, or if an outdoor-based course affects certain people many decades later. A study colored by both intellect and emotion would be an asset to contributing to such knowledge of how to affect different types of people in the long-term.

Furthermore, it is important consider how an outdoor experiential platform can support the teaching of academics. Further research would be helpful in contributing to effective educational practice, as we would have additional knowledge of the actual long-term effects of a program and why this is so, thereby justifying this type of educational approach. If we aspire to educate with consideration not only towards immediate outcomes for students, but also with regards to lifelong effects, we need to understand and further develop effective ways of doing so.

**Purpose and Significance of Proposed Study**

Thus, I propose an analysis of the transformational nature of an undergraduate program that integrates literature with an outdoor experiential platform. When looking at the academic literature on college-level outdoor experiential education in general, there is limited research on lifelong effects of a course on one’s life (e.g., Daniel, 2003; Gass, Garvey & Sugerman, 2003). Understandably the logistics of reconnecting with former participants decades later can be difficult. It leaves space to wonder the prospect and nature of the lifelong significance of an academic course that may offer technical skill, intrapersonal and interpersonal development, and also the delivery of subject matter related to a traditional or mainstream academic area of study. Such evaluation could lend
to the analysis of desired outcomes and course credibility, documenting this type of program’s worth in the university landscape.

This study proposes to develop a better understanding of how such a course impacts individuals, looking through both an academic skills-oriented lens as well as a character strengths lens. Davis-Berman and Berman (2005) discuss the need to conduct qualitative research that examines the environment in outdoor programs and their relation with the positive psychology paradigm. This also leads to analysis of how certain components of a course of this kind impact participants, leading to a better understanding and evaluation of course design.

As a course of focus for this study, the University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program (NELP) is an exemplar of a longstanding undergraduate academic English course that integrates the literature of New England writers, academic demands, exploratory writing and student experiences relating to regional literature and the land. Since 1975, each spring term a small contingent of students and educators has lived in the New England region as a community of learners, artists and explorers. NELP quickly evolved into a beloved program, having been started by Dr. Alan Howes and Dr. Walter Clark, two University of Michigan English professors, as a way for students to better comprehend and relate to the literature of New England (Miller, 1976). Clark also saw it as a way to connect learning to students’ ways of living and “to clear away the artificial impediments to learning” (Miller, 1976, p. 42), and he ultimately concluded that NELP embodied the ideal of a liberal arts education (N. Christensen, personal communication, May 12, 2012). Often, former participants will enthusiastically try to continue leading
lives where intellect and life philosophy and actions seamlessly blend upon their return to campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan or to lives beyond the university. However, formal research has not been conducted to examine such a program, to analyze the specific categorical impact that may last a lifetime on former participants, why participants are affected and what qualities of the program have impressed them.

**Research Questions**

In this doctoral dissertation, I focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What is the long-term impact of the New England Literature Program (NELP) on participants?
   a. Are there certain participant characteristics or experiences that contributed to the program’s impacts or lack thereof?
   b. What components of the New England Literature Program significantly contributed to participant learning and program impacts?

Thus follows is a discussion of the definition of outdoor experiential education used to guide this research. This leads in to a historical background of outdoor experiential education at the postsecondary level, which gives context to the current circumstances.
Defining Outdoor Experiential Education

Without a standardized outdoor education curriculum or a single body of outdoor education professionals, it is difficult to cultivate a precise definition of this kind of education that is steeped in experiences with the natural world (Ford, 1986; Neill, 2003). With such a range of terminology to describe like concepts within this realm of education (e.g., outdoor education, experiential education, adventure education, outdoor adventure education, wilderness therapy), it can be difficult to truly differentiate each modality and the corresponding intentions and structures. Here I will explore and define “outdoor education” and “experiential education” to clarify the usage in this review.

Outdoor education. An early definition to enter modern inquiry of outdoor education is that “Outdoor education is education 'in', 'about', and 'for' the out-of-doors" (Donaldson & Donaldson, 1958, p. 17). Indeed, this definition broadly refers to where it likely occurs and that it involves learning about the natural world in order to better understand our natural resources (Ford, 1986). Outdoor education can also achieve a better understanding of “relationships [that] concern not only the natural resources, but also people and society” (Priest, 1986, p. 13). Yet, the connotation of “outdoor education” as a term alone is often limited, overlooking the potential process and depth of the student experience.

Baker’s (2005) Landfull Framework takes the meaning of outdoor education a step further. Developing such a relationship with the land through outdoor pursuits should be more than merely negotiating the environment through finding a trail or campsite, recognizing the impact of weather or the sublime landscape (Baker, 2005).
Figure 5. Baker's (2005) Landfull Framework, which guides meaningful experiences in outdoor-based programming.

The Landfull Framework demonstrates the potential multidimensionality of place-based education that includes: (a) Being Deeply Aware (increased awareness of one’s surroundings), (b) Interpreting Land History (increased knowledge of the uniqueness of a particular landscape), (c) Sensing Place in the Present (facilitating connections to a place that are personalized and ever-evolving), and (d) Connecting to Home (promote the linking of landscapes—the transference from the backcountry to one’s front country home). In addition to developing one’s understanding of place (both a literal and figurative conception of one’s place in this world), this framework demonstrates that place-based education can impact various types of cognitive processes and knowledge acquisition.
**Experiential education.** The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) is a non-profit professional membership organization that offers a place to begin in defining experiential education: “Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (AEE, 2011). As exemplified by AEE’s definition, there are two essential components of experiential education—direct experience and reflection—for experience alone does not necessarily cultivate an educative outcome (Dewey, 1938).

Kolb’s (1984) work is often referenced when discussing experiential education, and his model was influenced by Dewey and Lewin (Atherton, 2002; Neill, 2010). The four-step cycle (figure 2) depicts the connection between experience and reflection, which leads to knowledge development and transformation. With relevant, active experience, learner reflection must follow, which leads to the learner constructing general principles to test in future experiences. Yet, with this model alone, it appears quite demanding on the learner to have multiple strengths at stages, which may or may not be supported by external guidance.
Likewise, Joplin (1995) explains that experiential education is,

…providing an experience for the learner, and facilitating the reflection on that experience…[as] experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education. (Joplin, 1995, p. 15)

Joplin’s model orients us to the basic elements of experiential learning cycling through focus (to assist the learner in identifying areas of concentration and future encounter), challenging action (the actual encounter with said problem, environment, etc.), support (establishing sufficient sense of security throughout for learner to take risks), feedback
(given at any point(s) throughout the cycle so that learner can move ahead) and debrief (the articulation, sorting and analysis of the experience(s)) (Joplin, 1995). While Joplin’s model (1995) is conceptually similar to Kolb’s (1984), it explicitly takes into account the importance of external support and security existing as part of the experience. Outdoor-oriented literature suggests that when perceived risk is too high the experience does not necessarily cultivate the greatest amount of learning; rather, there must be a certain sense of safety, as well as activities that are creative, reflective and social (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Leberman & Martin, 2002). The positive psychology paradigm of developing one’s skills and traits that enhance one’s well-being is very much connected to these concepts.

**Outdoor experiential education.** By uniting such terms as *outdoor experiential education*, we can take into account interactions with the natural world and the structural depth for such learning experiences. I do not wish to limit this definition of education to programs that purely use experiential learning theories—there are other theories that can be used to effectively guide and conduct outdoor-based programs (Gilbertson et al., 2006; Hammerman et al., 2001; Kime, 2008). However, the term experiential presents a way to conceptualize how to develop an intellectually rich and effective outdoor program—going beyond merely tramping through the woods. Outdoor experiential education addresses this need for the individual to be able to contextualize his or her place in this world, as well as interact with the integrated nature of educational subject matter, society and the natural world. John Dewey purported that in order for experiences to be educative, there needed to be relevance to the student’s life and a degree of reflection
(Dewey, 1929/2009); outdoor experiential education has the potential to be an effective modality to accomplish such goals. To summarize, outdoor experiential education offers the individual a direct experience with the natural world, in such a way that nurtures personal reflection on firsthand experiences and an increased awareness/understanding of connections between the self and one’s surroundings of the past, present and future.

**Historical Background of Outdoor Experiential Education at the Postsecondary Level**

Considering the inconsistent terminology of outdoor-related educational exploits, it is difficult to hone in on the establishment of outdoor education in the United States, as we know it today (Kime, 2008). At the postsecondary level, since the early 1900s, college “outing clubs” organized outdoor adventure and student development programs (Webb, 2000). The Dartmouth Outing Club established in 1911 at Dartmouth College and the Williams Outing Club established in 1915 at Williams College are considered the earliest established outing clubs at U.S. colleges (Webb, 2000).

The year 1930 is often considered the birth date of modern outdoor education in the United States, when the “educational values of camping” were recognized within K-12 education in particular. At this time, outdoor education entered modern scholarship with the first doctoral dissertations emerged focusing on camping and education (Hammerman, 1980, p. xi; van der Smissen, 1980). However, it should be noted that many proponents of learning through the senses or interactions with the natural world preceded this time (Hammerman, 1980). By the late 1930s, public K-12 schools were starting to consider camping experiences as an educational component conducted during
the summertime; by the 1940s, in addition to a proliferation of school-related camping experiences for youth across the country, various experimental institutes were also conducted to train teachers in camping education (Hammerman, 1980, p. 5).

By the 1960s, the field of outdoor education had grown, serving K-12 school-age children to graduate students (Hammerman, 1980, p. 7). As a result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, camping was considered a governmentally funded part of public education with more than five million dollars awarded for various outdoor residential centers and programs (Hammerman, 1980). Purposes also became more wide-ranging, and, by the 1970s, terminology grew with the development of environmental and adventure education (Hammerman, 1980). This was merely the beginning of the multiplicity and lack of standardization of terms for outdoor-related programming (Bachert, 1980). In 1970, the Environmental Education Act was passed (Bachert, 1980); this act established the Office of Environmental Education that awarded grants to develop environmental education curricula and provide professional development for teachers (however, this office was dismantled in the 1981 and a reincarnation of this act was established in 1990). In 1977, the Directory of outdoor education degree programs in higher education was published, creating a listing of university degree programs that would be of interest to prospective students, personnel in the outdoor education field and employers (Bachert, 1980), which was demonstrative of the growth in degree-granting programs reflected by the growth in the outdoor education field at-large. During the 1970s there was also a proliferation outdoor-oriented programming at colleges and universities: there was a flood of new freshmen wilderness orientation programs (Bell,
Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008), as well as the establishment of 45 college outdoor recreation programs between 1970 to 1975 alone (compare this to the 128 outdoor recreation programs established between 1976 and 1999) (Webb, 2000).

Since this era, the growth of outdoor-oriented degree programs at colleges and universities has been steady (Attarian, 2001). In the 1987 *Society of Park and Recreation Educators Curriculum Catalog* there were 17 colleges and universities with outdoor leadership courses or degrees; by 2001 this increased to 41 (Houghton, 2001). Alongside this increase in training opportunities in outdoor-related specialties, a higher hiring standard emerged in the field, with preference for hires trained by institutions like colleges, universities, Outward Bound or National Outdoor Leadership School (Gass & Garvey, 1999). Whether or not employment necessarily depends on an academic degree focusing on outdoor, experiential or adventure education, research has yet to show; however, in a survey of professionals at the 2000 AEE international conference, 91% of respondents either held or were pursuing an academic degree of some type (Medina, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Outdoor experiential education can affect participants in positive ways, including developing students’ understanding how they relate to the world, as well as addressing different ways of learning and being challenged (Taniguchi et al., 2005). Since the early 1900s, outdoor programming has entered the realm of higher education as extracurricular additions to the college experience (Webb, 2000), and by the 1960s outdoor education had grown to include degree programs and orientations (Hammerman, 1980). Chapter
two explores how outdoor-based programming is implemented today at colleges and universities and research on how participants benefit from such programs. Chapter three goes on to discuss how I researched the lifelong effects of such programs on both academic skills and character development. Chapter four shares the findings and emergent themes, while chapter five discusses these themes in terms of current literature, further implications and summarizes the study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review I provide a better understanding of outdoor experiential education’s current place in higher education and the impact outdoor education can have on the student experience. I provide an overview of the current state of outdoor experiential programs in higher education and some exemplary practices that we can derive from these programs. I also explore how outdoor experiential education impacts participants’ learning and personal growth through four emergent categories: (a) the development of outdoor technical skills and one’s relationship with nature, (b) improved aspiration and/or retention levels, (c) increased self-efficacy and analytical skills, and (d) development of interpersonal skills.

Outdoor Experiential Programs in Higher Education

In reviewing the literature and current practices of outdoor experiential education at the postsecondary level, four patterns of implementation have emerged: (a) institutional recreation departments or clubs, (b) first-year student orientation programs, (3) outdoor, experiential and adventure education degrees, and (4) mainstream academic courses. The following is a discussion of outdoor programming in these dimensions found in higher education.
Institutional recreation departments or clubs. College and university outdoor recreation departments tend to be a separate extracurricular option for students’ use. Overall, goals of such programs tend to include enhancing curricular education, promoting the enjoyment of outdoor recreation and developing morals, education and skills (Webb, 2000). Although priorities may vary, Webb (2000) has found a layered effect in that, “through income, recreation is offered; that through recreation, skill and education is stimulated; and that through skill and education, character development is enhanced,” yet the importance of each aspect is an inverse relationship to the stages of development (see Table 1) (p. 2).

Table 1. Webb (2000) depiction of the stages of outdoor recreation program goals.
As recent recipients of the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education’s (AORE) David J. Webb Program Excellence Award\(^1\), model outdoor recreation programs at colleges or universities include the Bowling Green State University (BGSU) Outdoor Program and the Portland State University Outdoor Program. Therefore, it seems appropriate to take a closer look at these programs to understand the leading trends of institutional outdoor recreational divisions.

The Bowling Green State University Outdoor Program mission is to:

- Encourage student development through experiential education in outdoor settings.
- Promote environmental stewardship and conservation.
- Create opportunities for leadership advancement, team development, and personal growth.
- Challenge students to expand beyond their personal boundaries and self imposed limitations to broaden their understanding of themselves and the natural world. (BGSU, n.d.)

Although without a posted in-depth mission statement, the Portland State University (PSU) Outdoor Program website states,

Since 1966, the Outdoor Program has been helping PSU students find great ways to get outdoors. Our wide variety of programs offer students the chance to enhance their academic careers through leadership development opportunities or in finding affordable ways to escape and meet fellow students. (PSU, n.d.)

\(^1\) The David J. Webb Program Excellence Award is an annual award that honors outstanding non-profit outdoor programs, primarily going to outdoor recreation departments at postsecondary institutions. Additional information is available at: http://www.aore.org/awards/default.aspx
Like many other college and university outdoor recreation departments, both institutions’ departments offer single- and multi-day outdoor trips and workshops that include a variety of outdoor pursuits such as backpacking, caving or kayaking. Both have an artificial rock climbing wall and offer affordable equipment rental. Further, BGSU offers custom teambuilding programs for student organizations and a freshman wilderness orientation program also falls under the Outdoor Program jurisdiction.

While such programs focus on outdoor recreation as a separate component from that of academics in the postsecondary education experience, their intention is to offer a complementary part of education that develops character, skills and knowledge, yet there is a peripheral placement of outdoor programming as part of a non-academic department. In this scenario, students must seek out such an experience as an additional service of the institution and not one that is integrated into the credited progression of their degree. However, the fact that an institution has an outdoor recreation department at all likely demonstrates that the school values developing the student through different modalities and that outdoor recreation is one such worthwhile tool and experience in general. BGSU’s departmental mission in particular demonstrates the intention to expand students’ self-concept and understanding of the natural world, which allows for potential exposure to counter-narratives and new ways to perceive and interact with the world.

**First-year wilderness orientation programs.** Another integration of outdoor experiential education at the postsecondary level is through first-year outdoor-based orientation programs. From 1968 to 1978 in particular, there was substantial growth of such wilderness orientation programs in the United States (albeit mostly at private
institutions); presently there are approximately 202 programs across the United States (Bell, Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008). Today such orientations are offered by many kinds of institutions, from small, private colleges (e.g., Colorado College, Middlebury College, Colby College) to larger, public universities (e.g., University of New Hampshire, University of California San Diego). Many wilderness orientations last from an extended weekend to a full week; some schools offer a selection of trips, such as backpacking, canoeing, or yoga and meditation-focused. Often these programs are instituted in addition to on-campus orientation programs, as it “enhances the students’ orientation experience and provides them with one more involved and unique opportunity to make connections with people prior to their first day of class” (Fears & Denke, 2001, p. 7).

In reviewing self-reported summaries of 39 outdoor orientation programs (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1995) and orientation websites, frequently cited program objectives include personal growth, developing relationships, learning new skills and connecting with the environment, having fun and easing the transition to college. This list of common objectives is confirmed by O’Keefe’s (1989) research analyzing 49 freshman wilderness orientation programs, which also classified orientations into three models, each with slightly differing program focuses on growth and skills (Table 2). Each model, while having some differing objectives, has interrelated aspects of growth and skill development. Overall, the significant goals across the board are to ease the transition to college, improve decision-making skills and develop interpersonal skills. However, building on this work a mere ten years later, Curtis (1999) suggests that orientation
programs must expand goals in light of the evolving student body and needs thereof (Table 3). While significant goals include easing the transition to college and developing students’ levels of maturity and relationships, there is a more explicit connection of the wilderness experience to academics and one’s personal ethic. Curtis also brings to the forefront the addressing of specific issues that college students may encounter. This vision of program objectives for today’s university is also reflective of trending in society and education, with shifts in liability issues, student and parent expectations, student diversity and retention levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Model I</th>
<th>Model II</th>
<th>Model III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program</strong></td>
<td>Develop peer identity, gain information about college, introduce students to outing club</td>
<td>Develop positive interaction with faculty, develop peer group identity</td>
<td>Improve retention, develop positive interaction with faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Growth</strong></td>
<td>Adjust and mature, enhance decision-making skills, increase personal initiative</td>
<td>Enhance decision-making skills</td>
<td>Adjust and mature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Skills</strong></td>
<td>Establish friendships</td>
<td>Learn small group skills</td>
<td>Develop small group problem-solving skills, reduce stereotyping, establish friendships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. O’Keefe’s (1989) three models (from Curtis, 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td>• Develop positive interactions with faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Curtis’ (1999) vision for goals of today’s wilderness orientation programs.

The supporting research, development and proliferation of wilderness orientations demonstrate that many schools are considering the relevance and power of outdoor-based programs in accomplishing standard orientation-related goals and beyond. However, much like an outdoor recreation department’s positioning in an institution, while the existence of a wilderness orientation demonstrates that there is value placed in this type of program, its frequent status as an optional supplement to a standard orientation is also demonstrative of the peripheral nature of an outdoor experiential program to mainstream academic education. Although most wilderness orientations are optional at this time, this outdoor experiential approach has opened institutions and participants to examine the
way schooling is organized and the different and potentially more effective ways there are to developing and orienting new students.

**Degree programs.** Another area of growth is in degree programs in outdoor studies and experiential education. In reference to such educational programs in the United Kingdom in particular, Humberstone and Brown (2006) have noted extensive growth in this degree area and consider that “the profession can now claim that the outdoors as a field of study is on the academic agenda” (p. 3), demonstrating shifts in how the academic sphere views outdoor education through the consideration this field is being given, especially abroad. The United States has also seen growth in such degree programs—a National Recreation and Park Association and Society of Park and Recreation Educators (2001) publication lists 41 colleges or universities that offer outdoor leadership courses or degrees (Attarian, 2001).

There is no overarching national teaching certification, for example, that standardizes the educational pathway to a career in outdoor, experiential or adventure education; therefore, such degree programs are seen in various permutations. For example, community colleges like Colorado Mountain College offer associate’s degrees and certificates in Outdoor Recreation Leadership and Outdoor Education to prepare students for further education or in positions such as outdoor program facilitators, wilderness therapy counselors, or outdoor program directors (Colorado Mountain College, n.d.). Baccalaureate and graduate degrees in the field are also offered at various schools across the country. For instance, the University of New Hampshire offers preeminent undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Outdoor and Experiential
Education (University of New Hampshire, n.d.). Essentially, with these types of programs students develop technical outdoor skills and leadership skills, as well as study outdoor and experiential education theory and research.

An essential quality of such degrees is that they embody an alternative way to approach education both in the experiential nature of many of the courses in such degree programs and the subject matter itself. Furthermore, through degrees focusing on outdoor- and experiential-related studies there is recognition of how this area of interest has an important role in the field of education.

**Academic courses for credit.** Most germane to my research interests are courses where academics and outdoor experiential education intersect. A small number of postsecondary institutions offer courses across a range of academic departments that integrate outdoor experiential education with academic goals, most of which appear to have come to fruition within the last forty years (the oldest courses still in existence appear to be Humboldt State University’s Sierra Institute and the University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program, both established in the 1970s).

For example, St. Lawrence University in New York offers this integration of the outdoors and academics in different ways: for the past decade they have run the Adirondack Semester, a residential semester in a remote wilderness area during which students study nature and human relationships through direct experience, exploring regional history, natural history and creative writing (St. Lawrence University, n.d.). At this institution there is also a philosophy course that integrates a backpacking component
in which the, “sublime aspect of nature reinforces experientially the course message that our ordinary ways of thinking and acting might be wrong, that change in our lives might be appropriate” (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000, p. 46-47). Likewise, Brigham Young University (BYU) combines an English course with a handful of outdoor experiences throughout the term, with “self-analysis through journal and personal essay writing is at the center of our program” (Bennion & Olsen, 2002, p. 240). In Bennion and Olsen’s experience as facilitators of this program, they have found that this type of collaborative residency helps students “synthesize components of their own lives which they previously held separate—their education, their personal writing, their relationship to others, and their place in the natural world” (p. 245). These academic programs demonstrate that there is a clear intentionality in connecting direct outdoor experiences with student reflection of both the course experience and life experience beyond the course. Another significant quality of such programs is the decompartmentalization of formal education, experience and life.

These types of courses are completed for academic credit; this factor alone demonstrates a value placed on courses that potentially integrate oft-separated divisions of knowledge and experiences in the classroom, yet have a symbiotic relationship when well-coordinated. Beyond utilizing writing skills or studying topics in philosophy or environmental science, such courses may also develop technical outdoor skills, interpersonal skills and self-efficacy through the inherent nature of isolated locales or activities as community-oriented environments.
Exemplary practices in outdoor experiential programs in higher education.

With an array of ways in which outdoor experiential education is being integrated into postsecondary education, it brings up the question of which instructional, curricular and logistical practices and intentions lead to producing effective programs. Through analyzing model outdoor experiential opportunities at postsecondary institutions and related literature through the context of eco-progressive education’s tenets of (a) scrutinizing the purposes and organization of schooling, (b) exposing students to counter-narratives, and (c) education that is integrated, relevant and experiential (Roberts, 2007), one can discern best practices that are contributing to exemplar experiences that deeply affect students’ sense of self, perspectives and ways of living.

Examination of the purposes and organization of schooling. The dedication of an institution’s resources to outdoor experiential opportunities demonstrates new perspectives towards what qualifies as education and what is an important part of education. Despite a growing body of research addressing numerous ways of processing new knowledge over the past fifty years, the primary format of delivery in the higher education setting remains to be a lecture (McKeachie, 1994), reflecting a deep-seated internalization of schooling norms. Even if students are intrinsically motivated to pursue higher education, students who do not effectively learn from the major pedagogical formats of postsecondary education may become frustrated and demoralized despite their best efforts (Johnson, 2006). Each way that outdoor experiential education is being effectively integrated with postsecondary education brings to light alternative ways of approaching formal education. Research has also shown that certain components of
wilder
ness programs are particularly useful in student development in particular. 
Orientation courses that have integrated challenge course and community-building 
initiatives have significantly increased retention rates and/or self-efficacy (Davis-Berman 
& Berman, 1996; Fears, 2001; Lanza, 1998; Prussia & Weis, 2004), factors that have 
likely encouraged many institutions to consider offering wilderness orientations as we 
have seen the growth in such programs. It is likely that this focused engagement with 
relationship building and interpersonal skills is a best practice to be utilized in many 
types of outdoor-based experiences.

In addition, outdoor experiential academic courses in particular compel involved 
parties (i.e. professors and administrators) to reconsider how departmental instruction and 
departmental credit distribution is most effectively organized. Garvey (2002) provides 
particular insight in that,

The current curriculum at most colleges and universities rewards isolation 
and specialization of the faculty. As members of these institutions we need to do whatever we can to integrate our knowledge rather than allow it to become increasingly fragmented. (p. 24)

For many programs of this kind to be enacted, inter-departmental collaboration can be an 
integral component. For example, BYU’s Wilderness Writing Program demonstrates 
how a recreation management professor and writing teacher from different departments 
in the university have joined together to cultivate a powerful program (Bennion & Olsen, 
2002). In this instance they found that bridging programs, and offering different 
departmental types of credit and instructor areas of specialization creates an educational 
approach that augments learning following the sensibilities of Eisner in such a way that
multiple forms of representation address and cultivate different skills (Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005). Furthermore, logistically these inter-departmental partnerships have contributed to an ease of earning useful academic credits from different departments and improvement of equipment resources for students.

Exposure to counter-narratives. Many of these place-based programs quite often expose participants to new ideas and ways of life that they may not have otherwise experienced so dynamically (if at all) in a lecture or online. Johnson and Fredrickson (2000) discuss how life on campus “encourages complacency” and that, “The ease and routine can suggest that the way we live is just the way we should live” (p. 46). Reflective engagement with the wilderness removes such familiarity with daily routine and can lead to deep internal shifts (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000). For academic courses in particular (see Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000; Bennion & Olsen, 2002), reflection on readings and experiences both via discussions and writing is an essential part of an effective program. This key to developing a new consciousness of alternative perspectives through intentional reflection aligns with research on effective experiential education and learning (Joplin, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Proudman, 1996).

Moreover, the importance of creating open atmospheres for a diverse range of students is vital, considering that students retain their social identities while on a course (Warren, 2005). Educational practices that value different lifestyles and perspectives of participants are integral to contributing to a more just society,

Education that is integrated, relevant and experiential. A strength of many of these types of outdoor experiential programs is the multi-dimensionality of the
experience. When we consider the diversity of college students, it is unlikely that a single style of teaching would be most effective for a majority (Reese & Dunn, 2007). By engaging multiple senses (such as the potential to combine kinesthetic aspects, sublimity of the natural world and cerebral qualities of a program), depth of meaning and understanding is greatly developed (Intrator, 2005). From their extensive experience facilitating a course offering dual credit in the recreation management and English departments, Bennion and Olsen (2002) have recognized that, “students who take journal notes, meditate, and write essays about their activities in the wilderness have a growing understanding of their own competence and values” (p. 240).

Furthermore, while an obvious intent of a college orientation program would be to ease the transition to college and educate new students of what to expect at the institution, objectives are often multi-fold, involving development of self-efficacy, community and having a new experience connecting with the natural world (O’Keefe, 1989). Student engagement with challenging wilderness experiences can go beyond mere intake of lectured information. Gordon (1999), an academic experiential course facilitator, finds that, “While our program is academic in content, many students find extended time in the wilderness also engenders profound psychological changes” (p. 13), which likely echoes throughout experiences on similar courses, as we see in the following discussion.

The Impact of Outdoor Experiential Education on Learning and Personal Growth

Research largely supports the numerous positive impacts of outdoor experiential education on participants (e.g., Gordon, 1999; Lanza, 1998; Prussia & Weis, 2004; Stott & Hall, 2003). This resonates across different types of outdoor-based programming,
whether a course is directed towards honing outdoor technical skills, a college orientation program, or an academic course. Through a review of the literature, four categories of the type of immediate impact such a program may have on participants consistently emerge: (a) the development of relationships and interpersonal skills, (b) development of outdoor technical skills and one’s relationship with nature, (c) improved aspiration and/or retention levels, and (d) increased self-knowledge and analytical skills. Thus follows is a synopsis of each area of benefit, including how each impact pertains to an eco-progressive lens.

**Development of relationships and interpersonal skills.** For outdoor experiential programs, explicit objectives may or may not include the development of relationships and associated relationship-building skills. However, often through the inherent nature of the small groups necessitated by wilderness-based programming, such interpersonal skills and relationships are developed (Miller, 2001; Sibthorp, 2003). In fact, for successful programming, organizing in smaller groups is encouraged to support the development of deeper relationships (Fears & Denke, 2001).

A study conducted to assess the long-term effects of the University of New Hampshire’s freshman wilderness orientation program found consistency in participants better understanding their assumptions of their selves and others as a result of this program (Gass, Garvey & Sugerman, 2003). One participant shared, upon reflecting on the wilderness orientation experience 17 years earlier,

*It kind of opened my eyes. I said, hey, wait a minute; these are really different people, with different perspectives and have different backgrounds from me. And everyone has different goals and look at all*
these possibilities. Most kids going to school don’t think about those things, the big picture. (Gass et al., 2003, p. 37)

With the oft-profound impact of the community aspect of a residential outdoor-based course, participants are exposed to counter-narratives through developing relationships that go beyond sitting next to one another in a lecture or discussion section. In these situations students have the opportunity to interact with diverse values and ideas, seeing new possibilities for ways of living, as this narrative exemplifies.

This development of compassion and consideration for others, as well as the potential for developing strong support networks during college, reflects other findings from research on outdoor programming. In research on National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) courses in particular, the course experience assists in the development of group skills like teamwork, improved communication and conflict resolution (Goldenberg & Soule, 2011; Sibthorp, Paisley, Furman, & Gookin, 2008). Stott and Hall’s (2003) wilderness expedition participants saw significant improvements in various social skills, like being able to live in crowded circumstances, cooperative leadership, motivating each other and managing emotions. Outdoor programming provides opportunities for developing competence in a number of interpersonal skills, which can be applied to life situations beyond the outdoor experiential course itself to life during college and beyond.

For Josie, a student in BYU’s Wilderness Writing course, she experienced significant fear during a physically and emotionally challenging experience in the desert, as she “fumbled down the steep precipice, my arms extended from my side like wings...I
had lost all faith and trust. The cairns were no comfort, I couldn’t hold on to them…” (Bennion & Olsen, 2002, p. 239). Despite feeling conflicted in being able to trust other participants, she found herself having to rely on them. As Bennion and Olsen discuss, she later felt a great sense of accomplishment, as well as compassion for the shared human experience of such challenges she had faced. Bennion and Olsen (2002) have also found that “extended time with each other helps students build a cohesive discourse community” and while students collaborate both academically through writing workshops and during their outdoor experiences, the cohesion allows for freer and deeper discussions (p. 241-242). For a university—where diversity of ideas and perspectives and academic freedom should be nurtured—there is evident value in developing peer relationships steeped in openness and mutual respect.

Perhaps the nature of a “simple, stripped-down social world” that a wilderness experience provides for students better clarifies the impact of behaviors through the immediate repercussions experienced (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000, p. 46). This type of community structure that engages students in acts of reliance, teamwork and compassion leads to a deeply personal understanding of human relationships. Although other learning goals are present, this social aspect of a program demonstrates the powerful nature of integrating experiences that value different types of knowledge acquisition.

**Development of outdoor technical skills and connection with the land.** With today’s menagerie of computers, smart phones, GPS devices and the like, often our interactions with the world are interpreted through and intercepted by technologies (Abram, 1996; Carlson, 2002). The nature of many of our urban and suburban lifestyles
in particular lends to us “not [being] in the habit of relating to land in a direct and intentional way” (Baker, 2005, p. 270), which may limit our conceptualizing of how much we truly rely on, impact and are impacted by the land.

In my pilot study interview with Gayle, a participant in the University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program (NELP) in 1975, a shift in her relationship with the natural world is demonstrable through various experiences. As someone who had been raised by sedentary, bookish parents, she had previously never experienced outdoors activities like camping or hiking, and admits she had never particularly cared for what she had once considered the annoyances of nature—like bugs and bad weather—prior to NELP. During our interview she describes a physically uncomfortable camping trip in the White Mountains near the Kankamangus River: the rain was incessant, flooding her tent and forcing her and her tent mate to scramble into another group’s tent. These conditions meant four people were sharing a two-person tent—which is a cramped space even with just two people. Yet, despite it all, they found a way to laugh throughout the entire night. In her words, “It just showed I could go through a really horrible outdoor experience—it was just pouring—and still have a good time.”

Gayle’s experience demonstrates how we can learn valuable lessons from this physical impact of the natural world: for one, discomfort at first glance can be an unwanted annoyance that detracts from one’s enjoyment of life; however, in reality, how one perceives and interacts with this inconvenience is integral to how it impacts them. This is a lesson that can be applied to many experiences in life.
This kind of experience is reflected in Rickinson et al.’s (2004) review of literature on outdoor learning from 1993 to 2003, which overwhelmingly found that when programs are effectively facilitated they positively contribute to participants’ ecological literacy and positive attitudinal changes towards the environment. Through one’s interactions with the outdoor world, there is the improved understanding of the environment and “its ecological, social and aesthetic value and our relationships with the world” (Lugg, 2007, p. 102; Orr, 2004).

For Lynn, a participant in BYU’s wilderness writing course, she recounts in a journal entry an early morning experience during a backpacking trip (Bennion & Olsen, 2002). As she and another student climb a cliff to a place for contemplation, she has an awareness of both the danger her friend faces as he climbs higher, as well as their impact on the environment as she looks down at the campsite. She notes how,

> The tents belong to plastic toys with round heads. There is a ribbon of dead lichens leading to the tents. Even up here on the rock face, we have left our mark. Boot prints in the sand, an astronaut’s first walk. (p. 241)

As Bennion and Olsen (2002) surmise,

> The acts of meditating and writing focused her attention so that she could perceive something new—the recognition that wherever humans go they affect the environment. The experience left her with a slightly heightened awareness of her own responsibility to care for the environment. She also discovered that humans are small in the universal scope of life. (p. 241)

Furthermore, often our commonly experienced disconnectedness to the environment in our daily lives detaches us from awareness of or care for the impact our actions have beyond our immediate needs—eco-progressive education can bring us to a deeply personal awareness through not only the experiential nature of a program, but also
through exposure to different ideas and ways of living. Ultimately, as we are living on a planet with finite resources, having a narrow awareness or lack of true understanding or care for long-term scenarios is potentially problematic for our own futures and the futures of the generations to follow.

Further, outdoor programs can improve one’s outdoor technical skills, which can lend to one’s sense of efficacy and knowledge base, lending us to reconsider the benefits of different types of educational structures. Research on academic outdoor adventure skills courses has found students to experience a sense of accomplishment, environmental stewardship and self-improvement (Ward & Yoshino, 2007)—multifold accomplishments demonstrative of the integrated power of eco-progressive education.

Stott and Hall (2003) conducted an analysis of various changes in personal, social and technical skills of 60 students ages 16 to 20 who completed a six-week expedition. Through the use of a pre- and post-expedition questionnaire, the researchers found significant changes (p<0.05) in participants’ outdoor technical skills (e.g., camp cooking, backcountry rescue, mountaineering), as well as improvement in certain personal skill areas, such as achieving goals and demonstrating confidence, inferring a connection between increased skill proficiency and increased confidence in abilities. Furthermore, by engaging with the environment and developing outdoor skills through direct experience, students better understand their own impact as a human on the environment in an immediate, intimate way (Bennion & Olsen, 2002).

Thus, the development of technical skills is not merely about gaining a new skill. In outdoor-based education it lends a way for people to have tangible interactions with an
immediate entity—such as the rock face they are rappelling down—and tangible results. The cultivation of abilities and demonstrative results from enacting these skills leads to a sense of accomplishment and improved self-efficacy. Furthermore, these interactions with the land can impact one’s conceptualization of their place in the world and even impact their values.

**Improved aspiration and/or retention levels.** Outdoor programs can also lead to an improvement in participant aspiration and/or retention levels (e.g., Davis-Berman, 1996; Fears & Denke, 2001; Prussia & Weis, 2004; Stott & Hall, 2003). Often it is interpreted that when students “complete a task they had previously thought insurmountable on a wilderness pursuit, this feeling of achievement can carry over into the academic setting and social interactions throughout campus” (Fears & Denke, 2001, p. 11) and even improve one’s goal setting abilities (Stott & Hall, 2003). Essentially, this development of resilience and accomplishment through an outdoor program has potential transferability to other life experiences—once this perceived insurmountable goal is accomplished there is the renewed possibility that perhaps anything can be achieved.

Postsecondary student orientation programs that incorporate wilderness experiences have particularly been noted to contribute to improved retention rates (O’Keefe, 1989; Prussia & Weis, 2004; Stremba, 1993). Lanza (1998) found that University of New Hampshire students who completed the wilderness orientation were “25 percent less likely to drop out their first year, and their grade point averages are a quarter-point higher than average” (p. 20). For a graduate program orientation, Prussia and Weis’ (2004) longitudinal study found that a newly required outdoor-based
experiential orientation course for students in an MBA program (that had previously been a more traditional type of orientation) significantly improved retention rates for students who had completed this course as compared to student retention rates prior to this program change. They found that retention rates were even higher for students who took this course during their first quarter as compared to those who completed it during their second or third quarter. This research concludes that through the use of experiential education, social integration, one of Tinto’s (1993) three principles for effective retention, is achieved, thus contributing to increased retention rates. This demonstrates the interconnectivity of the ways an outdoor experiential program impacts participants.

Narratives from Gass et al.’s (2003) 17-year retrospective of the long-term effects of a freshman wilderness orientation reflect that the program had both an immediate impact on many participants’ confidence in accomplishing goals during college, as well as on their confidence in their abilities beyond college. For instance, one participant explicitly connected that the sense of accomplishment achieved through this wilderness orientation carried over to the ability to pass college Spanish, too. Another connected the achievement of completing this wilderness orientation lending to the confidence to aspire to complete medical school (Gass et al., 2003).

Looking at this type of experience through an eco-progressive lens, when institutions consider this alternative way of conducting a freshman orientation program, a wider perspective of effective schooling practices is gained. A wilderness-based program can, indeed, educate students about the environment, but research shows that it also develops various kinds of knowledge, from that of relationships to technical skills. Once
the course is completed, the sense of accomplishment, new skills and improved support system can contribute to students’ perseverance in school. Although research on this aspect of outdoor experiential education is greatly limited to an understanding of the effects of wilderness orientation programs, this increased level of achievement is reflected well in Johnson and Fredrickson’s (2000) observation that, “When students emerge from the wilderness they have a swagger—often visibly and always invisibly—that announces their feelings: if I could do that trip, I can do anything” (p. 47).

**Increased self-knowledge and analytical skills.** Learning more about one’s self, one’s values and developing the skills to critically consider these issues and others are potential benefits of outdoor experiential education for participants. One significant reason often cited for such growth is the break in routine and the opportunity for new exploration of experiences that an outdoor-based program can offer (Bennion & Olsen, 2002; Fears & Denke, 2001; Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000). This could be considered as exposure to counter-narratives or counter-technologies, as participants experience different ways to interact with the world around them. Even if some participants are relatively comfortable in the outdoors,

…not all students will face fear or a feeling of being in foreign territory on a normal out-of-door experience, but most will discover something new about themselves or the environment they encounter. (Bennion & Olsen, 2002, p. 241)

Furthermore, such an experience can raise one’s consciousness to life choices as a result of the immediacy of the impact of actions by one’s self and others. For example, this may occur through examining conservation issues by backpacking in the wilderness
area, speaking with stakeholders and looking at the damage and potential environmental impacts firsthand (Gordon, 1999). Gordon, a Sierra Institute instructor, finds that in their meeting with the Forest Service while standing at the site of clear cut forest, old growth stands of trees and a proposed mine underneath the wilderness area, “the students gained a far deeper understanding of the inner workings, conflicts, perspectives, and policies of the Forest Service than I could have imparted in hours of lectures” (p. 11). The “collapse of the real world:school world false dichotomy” (Roberts, 2007, p. 225) is apparent in this scenario—the subject matter is tangible, the environmental effects are visible, thus making the implications an authenticated reality that can become personal.

For Gayle, a participant in my pilot study, reading the works of transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau while living close to the land in the same region during NELP, helped her consider what may have inspired such writers and has subsequently impacted her life philosophy. Following NELP she recognized a shift in how she wanted to live—she was, in her words, “a lot less rigid about life” and more interested in spending time outdoors. She chose to live life conscious of her actual needs in terms of material goods, questioning the necessity of having a new car, a bigger house or the best of everything. Gayle and her husband also exposed their children to the natural world through hiking trips and vacations on the east coast. Now, as a mother of two adult children, she is able to reflect on how much her Thoreauvian-influenced philosophy has also impacted them—for today her kids spend a lot of time outdoors and her daughter has pursued degrees in environmental science and sustainable urban development.
Outdoor experiential education can pose profound, personal questions to the participant, even when a program has a significant academic focus. Change can occur when, “deprived of the distractions and overstimulation of modern life, we are forced to confront ourselves, our relations with others, and our impact upon the environment.” (Gordon, 1999, p. 13). As professors of a wilderness ethics course further explain,

The sublime face of wilderness reminds us of the inadequacy of mere routine, of the need for wisdom about life and how to live it. We encounter the sublime through the immensity of the heavens in the night sky, the fathomless sweep of time embodied in the mountain stones, the indifference of the elements to whether we live or die. The stars, the stones, the tireless rhythms of the natural world call to us ceaselessly, asking: “Who are you? Where are you going? What does it all mean?” This sublime aspect of nature reinforces experientially the course message that our ordinary ways of thinking and acting might be wrong, that change in our lives might be appropriate. (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000, p. 46-47)

These instances illustrate the potential that is imbedded in outdoor experiential programs and eco-progressive education to change students’ perspectives and even their lives. The impact of place-based education is demonstrative of an effective educational structure for participants to intellectually consider ways of living. Through tangible and reflective experiences, the individual is personally impacted, contextualizing issues that may not have otherwise been so clearly related to or even considered.

**Sakofs & Armstrong (1996) Active Learning Cycle**

Through reviewing the literature on outdoor experiential programs and potential effects on participants it is apparent that there are consistent themes in program impacts across studies. Although the vast majority of studies assess short-term impacts, the
handful of studies that are oriented to assessing a long-term impact, such as Gass et al.’s (2003) study of a freshman wilderness orientation program and Daniel’s (2003) study of a Christian Outward Bound-type college-associated course, prove encouraging that many short- and long-term impacts share common themes.

In looking for a model that can demonstrate the aforementioned consistently established impacts of outdoor experiential education for college-level participants, I find Sakofs and Armstrong’s (1996) active learning cycle to provide a model for measuring (a) the development of relationships and interpersonal skills, (b) development of outdoor technical skills and one’s relationship with nature, (c) improved aspiration and/or retention levels, and (d) increased self-knowledge and analytical skills, which could aid in measuring one’s later adult relationship with these outcomes. Of particular concern for me in finding or developing a complete model that is applicable to my research interests is in finding one that recognizes the intellectual knowledge acquisition dimension of an academic course that is experiential in nature. While based on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and goes further than the primary goals of an Outward Bound-type course of personal and technical skill development, Sakofs and Armstrong’s active learning cycle includes the aspect that “personal experience and intellectual growth are drawn together through adventure and challenge to help students build an understanding of themselves and the world around them” (Sakofs & Armstrong, 1996, preface).
Although Sakofs and Armstrong (1996) discuss the logistics of integrating Outward Bound philosophies into the traditional K-12 classroom setting in particular (today often seen in Expeditionary Learning schools), I view this cycle as applicable to college-level courses where the academic and concrete experience are seamlessly integrated. At this level there is potential for being less hindered logistically than by that of the prevailing K-12 school design including standard class periods and expectations of teaching to statewide standards and assessments. This model accommodates the group-oriented nature of an outdoor experiential course that develops interpersonal skills, the concrete and physical experiences (such as the development of outdoor technical skills) that lead to new knowledge, psycho-emotional maturation and the like, academic growth and new
knowledge and understanding of content (which can potentially include improved aspiration/retention and/or intellectual knowledge), as well as new knowledge of self, confidence and self-efficacy.

**Conclusion**

In presenting an overview of the current practices of outdoor experiential education at the postsecondary level, we can see that outdoor experiential education is most often implemented at colleges and universities as extracurricular opportunities, with a smaller contingent of programs, degrees and courses offered as standard or co-curricular to one’s educational experience. Yet, when assessing the potential benefits of such programs, there is overwhelmingly affirmative research and anecdotal evidence considering the immediate effects of outdoor experiential education on participants’ learning and personal growth. While the outdoor experiential educational approach often appears on the periphery of formal education, it is apparent that students can greatly benefit from the interconnectedness, personal relevance, challenge and community-oriented nature that are often inherent to this approach. Considering the fact that potential impacts of outdoor experiential education include aspects of self-discovery, development of interpersonal skills, development of a deeper understanding of the world and increased aspiration levels, such an educational modality should have a significant place in higher education. At this level we are educating a population who, if they are not already, will soon be making adult choices on how they impact and interact with society, especially upon graduation and finding their place in the adult world. There is value in developing a human-nature relationship and inspiring students to question
essential pieces of themselves and what they will do with their lives. Essentially, outdoor experiential education can be used to structure and effectively engage the individual’s learning processes in a postsecondary setting; beyond one’s education we can infer that there is the potential for further positive influence.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology & Design

Introduction

As previously discussed, while research on outdoor experiential education has demonstrated that there are numerous positive impacts on participants, research on college-level courses that exist at this intersection of academics and outdoor experiential education is quite limited. Furthermore, the assessment of individual’s experiences and the course impact on one’s life as many as 35 years following a course likely does not exist. Through this research it is my intention to provide analysis that demonstrates how an academic outdoor experiential course impacts participants not only in the immediate experience, but beyond their college years.

This study examined how four former students of the University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program (NELP) have been influenced by this program, especially many years later following such an experience. Portraiture was used to cultivate a rich depiction of the lifelong significance NELP can have on participants. In this chapter I provide an overview of my research questions, introduce the qualitative research methodology of portraiture and further discuss portraiture as it was specifically pursued as my research method and design.
Research Questions

In the case of understanding the lifelong impacts of NELP, a qualitative exploration through portraiture was designed to be able to explore the multidimensionality of the human experience.

The research questions used to guide this study are:

1. What is the long-term impact of the New England Literature Program on participants?²
   a. Are there certain participant characteristics or experiences that contributed to the program’s impacts or lack thereof?
   b. What components of the New England Literature Program significantly contributed to participant learning and program impacts?

The Portraiture Methodology

At the heart of the portraiture method of inquiry is its, “blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6) so as to, “capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, xv). As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997)

² While a third sub-question “What did participants learn from this experience?” was originally considered, it was ultimately found to be redundant in terms of this study’s overarching question. In seeking a long-term impact, there was inherently a finding of what was learned or derived from the experience.
discuss, the ideal achievement is to locate the essence of the perspectives, experiences
and meaning through documentation, interpretation, analysis and narrative. Through this
exploration of people’s experiences and meaning making, this research process inherently
embraces a constructivist philosophy, affirming the existence and legitimacy of multiple
realities (Crotty, 1998). Essentially, as humans engage with the world, they interpret
and construct meanings from their experiences. Five features of portraiture—context,
voice, relationship, emergent themes and aesthetic whole—shape the iterative and
generative research process and product. Here I will discuss these features, following up
with my own application of this methodology and the research methods I employed.

**Context.** As part of data collection, for a portraitist, the context or setting—be it
physical, temporal or ideological—is a resource that frames the human experience
(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Giving weight to the impact of the external
environment is informative to understanding the experience and perspectives of research
participants. Through this naturalistic style, the participant perceptions and reactions as
related to experience are of value to the research, as is the angle from which the
researcher enters the space. Through rich description the researcher, “can weave together
the external ecology within the ideological and developmental odyssey of the place”
(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 52).

**Voice.** Furthermore, the voice of the researcher—much like the paint stroke of
the visual artist—is omnipresent, though disciplined, in portraiture. Voice is part of data
collection, analytic and narrative processes. As witness, the researcher’s voice gathers
details of a scene, ideally able to reveal nuances through new eyes (Lawrence-Lightfoot


As interpreter, the portraitist searches for meaning in the data. And beyond interpretive description, the portraitist’s *preoccupation* or “lens through which she sees and records reality” (p. 93) is present as explanation to how she pursues interpretation. The portraitist’s *autobiographical* voice further enhances the authenticity of the research through her own lived story, and wisdom drawn from experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Here the researcher’s experiences contribute to her understanding throughout this inquiry, and it is her awareness of such that contributes to being explicit in potential biases and providing an openness to the interpretations she makes and the external scrutiny that may occur. The researcher’s voice also *listens for other voices*—both in verbal and physical language—to contribute to an understanding of the multidimensionality of human experience. Combined, there is the intricacy of the conversation between the voices of the participant and researcher. Such a relationship can contribute to the depth of expression and interpretation—yet it is important to find a balance in, “…documenting the authentic portrait of others and drawing one’s self into the lines of the piece” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 86).

**Relationships.** Integral and integrated in all aspects of portraiture is the development of positive relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher’s intent is to cultivate compassionate, reciprocal and benign relationships with those involved with her research. The portraitist and participants are deeply related—we treat this research experience as a meaningful part of the lives of all parties and rely on one another to cultivate this meaning. Further, in crafting a portrait there is this search for goodness in aspects like interpersonal relationships, people and settings, and
observations. In part, this melding of voices and development of a partnership between researcher and participant is guided by a constructivist paradigm through this social co-construction of story.

**Emergent themes.** The search for themes and patterns is part of the portraitist’s analysis process in coding, organizing and scrutinizing data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Although the portraitist approaches the research with a framework and guiding questions, interpreting the data, “…is an iterative and generative process; the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). In this cycle, research is constantly informing and being informed by components of the research design.

**Aesthetic whole.** In creating a complete and authentic study, the portraitist must weave all elements of her research while paying attention to four dimensions that shape the final portrait(s):

…the first is the conception, which refers to the development of the overarching story; second is the structure, which refers to the sequencing and layering of emergent themes that scaffold the story; third is the form, which reflects the movement of the narrative…and last is the cohesion, which speaks about the unity and integrity of the piece. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 247)

In conception, the researcher pulls from participant experiences and pulls together themes from individual and collective experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Here the researcher pulls from the voices heard in this research process and shapes the flow and coherence of themes from this data.
The second dimension that shapes the research is *structure*, often appearing as subheadings to the larger themes in a portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Essentially such structure serves as a way to organize and lend clarity to emergent themes.

The *form* of portraiture is that which moves along the narrative through stories, examples and the like (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This aspect of a portrait lends to the texture and color, enriching the depiction of themes that emerge throughout the research.

Finally, providing the portraitist has considered the conception, structure and form of her portrait(s), through *coherence*, all parts are put together in an orderly, logical and aesthetic way conducive to the telling of themes and stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**The Study Focus**

The primary focus of this study is four former New England Literature Program participants and their subsequent life choices, perspectives and values as shaped by their experience at NELP, a program that can often be considered a key educational experience for participants. These portraits cultivate the stories and emergent themes that also speak to the NELP experience, how the course affects participants and what components of the program most contribute to participant learning.

Since 1975, each spring a small group of undergraduate students and educators head into the woods of Maine to, “…live and work together closely, reading New
England authors, writing, and exploring the New England countryside, its people, culture, and history” (NELP brochure, 2011, p. 2). NELP is a six-and-a-half-week residential course that takes place at a rural camp setting in Maine during the University of Michigan’s spring term, though for many years it took place in New Hampshire. Eight English credits are obtained for this course and undergraduates from any major can apply to the program. Here, in the woods of New England, this community must walk and climb paths of rolling waves of rocks and earth; many classes are held on the craggy granite rocks that dot Maine’s landscape. The course integrates outdoor experiential education and academics and it is here that we see the workings of two essential components of experiential education:

…providing an experience for the learner, and facilitating the reflection on that experience…[as] experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education. (Joplin, 1995, p. 15)

Through exploring key educational experiences in higher education, we can better understand the effects and inner makings of such events, especially when few studies focus directly on key or peak experiences in higher education and often take a more cumulative approach towards the impact of higher education (Yair, 2008). In order to discuss a key experience, it is important to recognize Maslow’s concept of a peak experience from which this idea stems. Maslow developed the term peak experience to describe intense short-term experiences that have positive lasting effects on one’s life. Such an experience may include the qualities of one having very strong positive emotions, a sense of peacefulness and loss of self-consciousness, a harmonization with
the universe, a sensation of profound understanding, feeling more fully in charge of one’s volition and having a sense that the experience is difficult to adequately describe through words (Maslow, 1961). Peak experiences involve an integration within the individual and between one’s self and the world, with one becoming more open to experiences and functioning at a level of ease or “being in the groove” (Maslow, 1961). Stemming from this notion, is the concept of a key educational experience such as NELP, that affect one’s sense of self and identity and thus have long lasting effects far beyond the experience (Yair, 2008). Research shows that key experiences at the postsecondary level involve academically challenging circumstances that nurture students’ self-discovery through gaining self-knowledge about their own abilities, as well as including words of wisdom from their teachers that are emotionally moving and have long-term influences (Yair, 2008). This investigation of the long-term influence of a key educational experience like NELP takes an interest in the development of participants’ abilities and strengths.

**Frameworks: Skill & Knowledge Development and Character Strength Development**

Two lenses were utilized in analyzing how NELP has influenced participants: First, a skill and knowledge development lens, which also assesses more standard academic-related outcomes. Second, a character strength-oriented lens gives light to outcomes related to influences on perspectives and values.

The skill and knowledge development lens addresses more conventionally considered academic skills, as well as outdoor skills. This lens is based on both current
research findings of outdoor experiential education’s potential impacts, as well as NELP’s vision of assessment of academic performance, per their documentation.

The character strength development lens is based on positive psychologists Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) conceptualization of character strengths and virtues that contribute to cultivating a good life. Positive psychology focuses on “what goes right in life” (Peterson, 2009, p. 3), in part, studying how positive qualities, like these character strengths, can support a satisfying, fulfilling life worth living (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Traditionally, the field of psychology has had a deficit-oriented approach to human functioning; however, the realm of positive psychology focuses on developing a scientific understanding of and amplification of strengths that support the flourishing of individuals and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Berman and Davis-Berman (2005) specifically discuss how participants in outdoor education programs are looking for experiences different from their everyday lives and that, “These experiences might be best understood and framed by positive theories of change that focus on how people can be helped to become stronger, feel better, develop their uniqueness, and otherwise grow” (p. 21). These ideas lead to a natural connection to using a character strengths lens that represent qualities that can support one’s growth and flourishing. The lens in this study will specifically look at nine strengths that are part of a collection of strengths and virtues that have been developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), based on analysis of historical and ubiquitous perceptions of virtues across cultures that support one’s success and fulfillment. These strengths have
been selected based on my literature review findings, as well as findings from my exploratory pilot study conducted in the spring of 2011.

Essentially, while this course is academic and grading is often based on intellectual growth, there is also the outdoor experiential component that complements and contributes to program outcomes. Ideally a more focused and systematic analysis is possible by defining and categorizing potential qualities impacted by the course, as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill/Knowledge Development</th>
<th>Character Strength Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *Analysis*: examination, exploration, reflection | *Open-mindedness*  
*Love of learning*  
*Perspective* |
| *Synthesis*: unifying/understanding several important concepts | *Persistence* |
| *Writing*: self-reflective and literarily-reflective, complicated, depicts development of new ideas and connections | *Social intelligence* |
| *Outdoor-related*: technical skills, nature awareness and knowledge, stewardship | *Citizenship* |
| | *Self-regulation*  
*Appreciation of beauty and excellence*  
*Spirituality* |

Table 4. Skill/Knowledge Development and Character Strength Development Frameworks

**Data Collection Methods**

Data sources include (a) interviews, (b) documents and (c) observations. First, I conducted interviews with four former NELP participants. On-site observations were
then conducted during the spring term of 2012. Throughout the study I collected and analyzed documents from both participants and NELP. The following discusses how these methods were used.

**Interviews.** I established this study’s participants through purposeful sampling, so as to select participants who fit certain criteria and to ensure for adequate and appropriate information conducive to my intentions (Patton, 2002). As the primary unit of analysis for this study, in order to fit the criteria as a research participant, the individual must have participated as an undergraduate at NELP at some point between 1975 and 2005. This was to ensure that enough life experience and perspective on this past experience have been established. Further, I aimed to find participants who had been students at NELP who were representative of years across this distribution in the interest to more fairly represent this alumni population.

Participants were located through the NELP alumni website and through word-of-mouth, and were emailed a request for their participation to establish first contact (see Appendix A for email protocol). I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with four individuals who participated in NELP at some point between 1975 and 2005 (see Appendix B for participant interview guide). Open-ended questions were used to allow participants freedom in expressing their thoughts and experiences, while a guide of questions and themes helped provide structure not only during interviews, but also during the process of analysis (Patton, 2002). Themes that were addressed in these interviews were based on the aforementioned skill and knowledge framework and character strengths framework. Before conducting formal data collection, these questions were
also piloted with an individual who also falls into the criteria as a NELP participant between 1975 and 2005 so as to test clarity and understanding of potential questions (Creswell, 2005). Aric Knuth, the current director of NELP (who also participated in NELP during his undergraduate education), was also interviewed from a director and faculty’s point of view (see Appendix C for the NELP director/faculty interview guide), as were additional veteran NELP instructors. Information from these interviews is referenced throughout the findings and discussion supporting and further explicating themes. Study participants were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions to hone in on what participants learned from their NELP experience, whether certain personal characteristics or experiences shaped these impacts and what components of the course contributed to their learning and the program’s impacts. Initial interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes long. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. Subsequent contact for clarification purposes, further insight and member checking was conducted by email and telephone.

All participants were provided with an informed consent form (see Appendix D). The four primary participants of interest were provided with pseudonyms for anonymity. The director of NELP and NELP faculty were given the option to have their identity known or concealed for this study (and they were all open to disclosing their identities). Everyone had the option to terminate their participation in this study with no repercussion.

My own voice sharing my experience as a former NELP student was also used to lend context, color and perspective to the themes and stories that resulted from all data
collection. Prior to conducting interviews, I recorded and transcribed my own responses according to the interview protocol so as to gain a clearer sense of my own perspectives and that which to expect as an interviewer. I also documented my experiences, observations, thoughts and analysis in a research log throughout the process, so as to better guide the narrative voice.

**Document analysis.** Three categories of documents were used to support the development of these portraits: course documents, journalistic documents relating to NELP and student reading material associated with NELP (see Appendix E for a document analysis protocol). The benefits of each are as follows.

I used course documents obtained from the current director of NELP to contribute to my analysis of how the course impacts and intends to impact students. Sensitive materials were used to guide my analysis and understanding, referenced in a general way or not referenced at all, depending on the document. Assigned reading materials for NELP (like books and articles) were referenced to add context and lend voice to the literary influences on NELP participants.

Other documents that were used to contribute to my analysis and understanding were journalistic documents, such as published journal or newspaper articles about NELP. These, too, lended context to frame the human experience. My initial intentions were to also utilize excerpts from participants’ NELP journals, since all students must maintain a journal at NELP, which will be submitted at the end of course as part of the NELP grading system. Any and all thoughts, scribbles, drawings and the like go into one’s journal as a record of academic, philosophical, experiential and personal musings.
Thus, journal entries could quite depictive of the participant experience and the course’s influence on one’s thoughts and perspectives. Despite probing following our interviews as I was member checking for accuracy of each portrait and emergent themes, none of the participants shared any journal entries with me. One participant had lost his journal over the years, although he had a compelling story that drew me in, which, I believe, came through his narrative. Perhaps the lack of excerpts from the other participants is understandable, as people lead busy lives and would not necessarily spend the time sifting through their journals for specific entries. They also may consider their NELP journals as very personal documents and they may be cautious of being directly quoted in print. I do not consider this a deep hindrance to this study, considering participants were forthcoming and approachable in our conversations, and member checking with these participants confirmed the accuracy of portraits and themes or clarified points when necessary. Additionally, other sources (e.g., course documents, interviews with NELP faculty) often served as further support to participant experiences. However, journal excerpts would have clearly been helpful to have as an additional point of reference.

Observation. There are two particular points of observation that were of particular use to constructing these portraits: interviewee observations and on-site program observations. Both provide clues, insights and material to color the portraits, as Yin (2003) affirms that, “observational evidence is often useful in providing additional information about the topic” (p. 93). On-site observations were conducted at NELP during the spring of 2012. Such observations enrich the data with the sights, sounds and smells of NELP in the woods of Maine. These on-site observations focused more on
instructional strategies and the setting experience, as opposed to the individual participant experience. To enrich the portraits of my primary research participants, observations occurred during the time I spend with them during our in-person interview sessions. See Appendix F for observation protocol.

Validity & Generalization

To reinforce the validity of this research, multiple techniques have been employed. Essentially, validity is concerned with the accuracy and credibility of a study’s interpretation; the concern in qualitative research is not necessarily to locate an objective absolute truth, but rather to fairly represent the data (Patton, 2002). Data have been collected from multiple sources of evidence, namely through interviews with former NELP participants, as well as with the current program director and long-time instructors, direct observations and document analysis. These multiple sources have been used to triangulate data—essentially, to corroborate or challenge common themes across multiple participant experiences in order to strengthen the credibility of this study (Patton, 2002). Like Yin’s (2003) convergence of evidence from multiple sources leading to the development and corroboration of a fact, data throughout the research process informed and confirmed emergent themes and patterns. Developing good relationships with research participants and member checking to corroborate information also improved reliability, as was my own maintaining of a fieldwork notebook and the use of thick description when developing portraits (Patton, 2002).

Much like a case study database, through this iterative and generative research process I accumulated relevant materials such as notes from interviews, documents and
analysis, notes from direct observations and the like. The raw data were available for review by my committee or other critical parties, if necessary, thus increasing reliability (Yin, 2003).

When considering the implications beyond this case, the type of generalizability that is sought after by a portraitist is the intent,

…to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified. The portraitist is very interested in the single case because she believes that embedded in it the reader will discover resonant universal themes. The more specific, the more subtle the description, the more likely it is to evoke identification. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14)

A driving force is this clear and accurate depiction of the human experience that has resonance for readers. As a constructivist researcher, I believe in the subjective multiple realities that exist for each of us, thus I embraced the contribution of each participant’s voice. Generalizability in the traditionally quantitative sense is not necessarily a goal of this research; rather, there is value in gaining insight to experiences and best practices that may have the potential for limited transferability.

Contributing to clearly documenting the essence of experiences is the systematic and rigorous analysis that occurs and is blended into an aesthetically-oriented narrative, appealing to both intellect and emotion (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Accuracy is enhanced through the establishment of various protocols to guide interviews, observations and document analyses (Stake, 1995).
Constructing the Aesthetic Whole

In constructing the portraits, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) outline general procedural recommendations, that thus follow. I recorded anticipatory themes prior to conducting research, which were modified throughout the research process. Following each day’s data collection, data was organized and analyzed. Daily reflection on data occurred, which included the constant listening for and recognition of emergent themes. Data was sorted, grouped and classified, following each data collection foray. Data was coded for patterns and emergent themes (Creswell, 2005). Further, these emergent themes and initial portraits were shared with study participants to ensure accuracy in interpretation and analysis.

Through my reflection of the data, and listening for common experiences and themes, conception of the overarching framework of the stories emerged. Organization of the portraits was integral to also developing the structure within the larger themes—through the iterative process of analyzing, sorting, classifying and coding data I was able to pull headings, significant metaphors or themes that were used to organize the portraits. As part of the coding process, I recorded impressions both prior to and following interviews and observations. I personally transcribed each interview, dancing between data sources as I analyzed notable refrains and patterns. I then converged such significant patterns into thematic categories. The form of the portraits came from a depth of analytical, emotional and aesthetically-oriented connection with the experiences, documents and observations that ultimately encompass these portraits. It is here where I as the portraitist blended the stories and illustrations in a strong, coherent way to create a
narrative that richly depicts the emergent themes of the research. Often dependent on logistics and balance, I did have to make decisions in my use and application of interpretation and description in order to construct an aesthetic whole that evoked the essence of the experiences expressed through this study.

Role of the Researcher

I recognize that as a qualitative researcher in particular, my interpretations are influenced by my values and perceptions; however, I also realize “that completely value-free inquiry is impossible” (Patton, 2002, p. 93) and that my own transparency is important. Most definitely it was integral to this study to engage with multiple participant perspectives and data sources, but it was also important to have an awareness of self.

As the researcher, there is a complexity of insider and outsider identities with which I have operated. In 2005 I was a NELPer myself, which completed my final term as an undergraduate. I left deeply moved and somewhat stunned, knowing I had danced with a key educational experience and remarkable life experience, internally analyzing it throughout the following years, until I had an opportunity to explore it in this study in a more external and systematic way. Indeed, I found it important to leverage the emic perspective I have as a NELP alumna myself, as it not only provided me with a way to establish rapport with the interviewees, but also gave me an experiential understanding of the program. My own NELP experience helped to support my own understanding and analysis, yet it is in the multiple experiences and resources that lend to this study’s trustworthiness. And in a more general way, through various outdoor experiential
programs that I have either participated in as a facilitator, coordinator or student, I clearly have a personal investment in and degree of understanding of these unique forms of education.

However, besides being an alumna, I am not currently affiliated with New England Literature Program or the University of Michigan itself. In this sense, I am approaching this analysis with some distance and even using an investigative angle or perspective that is likely rather different than that of someone currently involved with NELP. In the simplest terms, I am looking in on a common experience that I, too, have had, and yet, I am not immersed in the NELP world today. My only vested interested would be for such a program to continue to exist so that other people can experience what is potentially a key life experience.

While I embarked on this research in part because it held personal meaning and interest for me, I will admit that there was an emotional impact beyond that which I had anticipated during the research process. Especially in revisiting my own emotionally revealing journals from NELP and my experiences as an undergraduate, I felt quite vulnerable at times when evoking such past impressions and occurrences. Thus, while the stories I tell throughout this study are often of others’ specific experiences, for me, there was an emotionality throughout the process of crafting the texture of this research that may not always necessarily be seen on the surface as a result my own desire to let the voices of others shine through.
Rationale for Portraiture

For research that is oriented to the human experience, development and life choices, portraiture seemed a natural choice as a way to embark on this journey. First, the aesthetic fundamentals of portraiture complement the aesthetic fundamentals of the program at the center of this inquiry. The New England Literature Program provides a holistic educational experience that intertwines the poetry of written word, life and the natural world. Second, portraiture accounts for the researcher’s perspective, as the researcher’s voice and presence is a central, yet disciplined, component of the process and narrative. As someone who was a student at NELP in 2005, my perspective is worthwhile to consider throughout the inquiry process and can contribute to the richness of inquiry, essence of experiences and the understanding in relationships between myself and participants. Third, there is space for creativity in presenting the research. The emotional resonance of the human experience cannot always be translated through just a researcher’s standard academic prose; therefore, the space for several kinds of voice and expression have the potential to strengthen the research product. Fourth, the search for goodness that is inherent to portraiture is at the heart of my intentions in locating the value of such a program in the university landscape. Aligned with this approach, the researcher seeks to “inform and inspire” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, xvi) the ways in which we approach higher education. Fifth, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) reference Featherstone (1989) as describing portraiture as “a people’s scholarship” and lending credit to the communal construction of scholarship. NELP, and most conceptions of outdoor experiential education, is a community endeavor in itself—such
experiences “work” because each participant contributes voice, action, support and reliance in some way. This study most definitely relies on the contributions of the participants through their experiences and perspectives. Finally, the analytic rigor deepens the meaning of this study—although this research follows stories of lives and experiences it is not just a story—it is careful scrutiny and analysis that makes the scholarship.

It should be mentioned that, as a researcher, I have made various decisions as to the particular language I have used in this document and in how I discuss my findings. For example, I have used words like “impact,” for example, that may have a connotation as a rather firm and definitive value, which may also be read as a more positivist interpretation. Being that this is an academic document, I did choose certain words that are used in research because they are commonly understood indicators of processes and stages in a study. However, I want it to be known that this type of study is still an interpretation of multiple realities, and is not the end-all-be-all story of this type of experience—it is representative of the experiences shared for this study, and there are still many other voices to be heard that were not a part of this study.

**Conclusion**

Through this study, it was my intention to develop an understanding of how an academic outdoor experiential program can influence participants’ lives many years later. Ultimately, it is hoped that these portraits lend insight to the development of criteria for effective academic program design in order to cultivate meaningful outcomes for participants that are both academically- and character-oriented. As accurately as could be
done through translating others’ stories into the text of this study, I relied on the voices of those willing to share their life experiences and perspectives, and provided a space for them to openly do so. In support of this beloved course in particular, and in support of like courses, I hope this research advocates for these programs and why they must continue to exist and the value of their proliferation.
Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

When I consider how to begin this story, the story that is a multi-person and multi-generational perspective of NELP and life, I should probably begin at where my relationship with NELP began. Always, I have been a child of the summertime—of itchy grass, of summer camp, hiking dirt paths through Michigan’s woodlands, watching sun-hued monarchs flutter, building campfires, climbing hills, then mountains, then life’s textured pathways as I traveled westward, gaining independence.

I came to NELP/NELP came to me my senior year at the University of Michigan, serving as the final term of my undergraduate education. I left for NELP with all of my possessions that would be needed for 6 ½ weeks in the woods packed into my forest green hiking pack—a pack that had already seen many summers of hiking trails, already bearing patched wounds here and there. Before reaching Maine, a place I had never been before, I was not apprehensive for a rustic spring in New England. Perhaps that part of the experience was truly unknown, despite many nights spent throughout past summers without light switches or furnaces. As for the academic aspect, I was nervous, as I hardly felt gifted, often sitting in classes and lecture halls full of studious overachievers at a competitive institution. That, and little did I know, the challenges that would be endured
in tolerating Maine’s frigid nights, the bitter air still cutting through the mornings as spring thaws into summer.

Seven springs have since passed—seven springs of reflecting on this entity endearingly called NELP, a nickname for an old friend to all of us who have passed through its arms. As I have traveled further as an educator and learner I keep finding my compass intuitively pointing to the experiential—especially that crossroads of the academic and intellectual activity interwoven with the natural world. This study specifically sought to develop greater insight related to the following questions:

1. What is the long-term impact of the New England Literature Program (NELP) on participants?

   a. Are there certain participant characteristics or experiences that contributed to the program’s impacts or lack thereof?

   b. What components of the New England Literature Program significantly contributed to participant learning and program impacts?

Results of this study are presented in this chapter in two sections. First, participants are presented in individual portraits of their own experiences, based primarily on in-person interviews and follow-up communication. Shaping these stories is context, and a dance of participant and researcher voice. The next section presents emergent themes primarily relating to how this course has affected participants long-term, while also presenting themes relating to participant characteristics and program components. In
chapter five I continue the discussion by drawing in current literature, as well as by looking at implications for practice through primarily discussing both the nature of participant characteristics and how they may contribute to the effect of the course, as well as the components of the program that appear to be significant to the course’s efficacy.

Participants

Participants in this study share the particular commonality of having been a student at NELP at some point during their undergraduate education at the University of Michigan. While each individual has followed his or her own life trajectory, after learning about the experiences and perspectives of Nancy, Richard, Alex and Ella I feel we are all kindred spirits: reflective and open to discussing this life experience—among other experiences—warmly and fondly.

One objective of this research design was to connect with former NELPers who participated at points throughout NELP’s own lifespan. This was intentional, in part, to triangulate the consistency of the course throughout the past 37 years, as well as to see how the experience has been applied or has influenced different parts or stages of people’s lives, if at all. Indeed, long-term consistency with the course was revealed—many times over, as a participant from 1979 could reference a particular day’s activity or authors that a participant from 1999 had also mentioned, and through reviewing syllabi from various years and in speaking with long-time staff members they have corroborated the consistency of the essential nature of the program.

The individuals in this study are, indeed, at different life stages today: former NELPers from 1979 and 1983 are now in their fifties, at a more mature point in their
careers, married and with kids in their teens and twenties. The participant who was a student at NELP in 1999 is just beginning his family, with a child to be born later this year; the NELPer from 2005 has only been immersed in her intended career pathway for five years and will be married later this year. While the two participants who were students at NELP in 1999 and 2005 now live in the Washington, D.C. metro area, the individual who participated in 1979 lives in the Denver metro area, while the individual from 1983 resides in the Detroit suburbs. All grew up in Southeastern Michigan, are White and appear to live middle-class lifestyles; two participants are Jewish and two do not associate with any religion. There is much variation in their career choices, as well as actual college majors—only two had had an English concentration, one of whom had already completed coursework for an engineering degree by the time he attended NELP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Year at NELP</th>
<th>Class when at NELP</th>
<th>Undergraduate Major</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Current place of residence</th>
<th>Current profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Denver metro area</td>
<td>Registered Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Detroit suburb</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Engineering, English</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Washington, D.C. suburb</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>English major, Spanish minor</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Washington, D.C.</td>
<td>Radio producer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Outline of this study’s participant characteristics.

Thus, while each person has had varying life experiences to date, connecting with these former NELPers has revealed common themes as to how the course has influenced their lives. Each make up part of the quilt Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) reference—an aesthetic whole—that also reveals a portrait of NELP. That which
follows are portraits of these individuals and their experiences, which leads into emergent themes reflected by multiple participants as to what they learned.

**Nancy, NELP V (1979).** Driving to meet Nancy near her home in the metro Denver area, I couldn’t help but revel in this sixty degree, bluebird sky day in March. When out-of-state folks consider Denver, they probably imagine that sky-hued crusty glaciers rumble and slide across the town, freezing our lives until May. In actuality, an annual 300 days of sunshine make for a relatively mild winter in the city, with flurries and storms interspersed with many stunning days of the sunrays beckoning us outside.

We meet at 5:00 p.m., after a day of work for both of us, Nancy having returned from her job as a Registered Nurse at a local hospital. Driving westward at this time late in the day, the Rockies have already taken on a muted purple as the sun sets behind. If ever you lose your bearings, that’s how you know which direction you’re driving in this sprawling city, as the foothills of the Rockies lie west of the city.

Cherishing the last moments of a day’s warmth, we sit at a table outside her local library, which is down the street from her house. Later, when dropping off some documents I borrowed, I find it is a house that lies in the center of swirling subdivision roads and drives and courts named after things like trees and flowers and people of yore that are lined with well-maintained homes with shuttered windows and mowed lawns. In her early fifties now, Nancy was 19 when she was a student at NELP in 1979, the fifth spring term the program had been run. Today she is energetic and fit, one who takes advantage of the outdoor-oriented lifestyle so many of us come to Colorado for, which is also reflected in her fair, sun-freckled skin. Her blue eyes sparkle as she thinks hard to
recall this “blast from the past,” recounting what this particular experience was like for her. Married and with three kids—one who graduated from the University of Michigan just a few years ago and one who is a current student—she lives a stable life with her husband, working as a nurse as she has since graduation from college thirty years ago.

“The impact was more personal, really. It wasn’t career-oriented. It was more who I am as a person.” At nineteen, during her second year of college, Nancy had already decided to pursue a degree in nursing. For Nancy, it was her RA who drew her to NELP as she often talked of her own experience with this program, that it was based outside and would be the perfect fit for Nancy. She had already been hiking many times over with her family, especially when her Europe-born parents would take her to visit family in Europe, where they would also spend time outside in the mountains. Knowing this, she figured it would probably be a great experience for herself, too.

Though prior to NELP she had been hiking with her family, she was never one to plan an excursion, so NELP was relatively instrumental in providing her with the tools to plan hiking trips and to be able to enjoy the outdoors more independently. She admits there are limitations to her maintenance of specific skills from 1979, as demonstrated by the orienteering required of “Get Lost Day.” On this particular day near the beginning of the course, students are separated into groups of four or five students, driven after breakfast to an unknown location by a staff member, dropped off with a topographical map often of questionable publication age, a compass and the instruction to be back at camp by 5:00 p.m. I remember my own “Get Lost Day” as a truly unique experience, and the creative exploration it conjured up in traversing an unknown land with a long ago
outdated map, through thick forests, along calm and clear lakesides, and down roads, both newly paved and crusty gravel. Looking back in my journal, I reflected through poetry and literature, intellect and experience intertwined. Today, Nancy doesn’t feel that she is, “…very good at orienteering as a result [laughing], but at least it started things out and what to do and how to go about it.” Ultimately she knew she was an “outdoors person”; this program merely reinforced the importance of this quality to her:

I think I have always been an outdoors person, I go stir-crazy if I’m not able to be outside. One of the reasons I love being out here in Colorado is because you can be outside so much. It [NELP] was a good place for me to be because it’s what I enjoy. Just reading through some of the journal, talking about, “Oh, it rained for three days, but I’m going outside anyway.” Being outside is really important to me and I think it just helped accentuate it...

Hiking Mt. Washington was one of the most memorable moments from NELP that reiterated the importance of a mountainous landscape for her, personally. Mt. Washington is the highest peak in Northeastern United States. At just over 6,000 feet, it shadows the land beyond, and though many peaks in the Rocky Mountains of the West spire more than twice as high, this mountain is known for its erratic weather and high winds. She felt a rush from “just being up above it all,” being able to have a view from a mountainside, gazing out at the land below that stretched on for miles, knowing she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life in the relatively flat lands of Michigan.

Nancy also considered the experience as one that, in part, reinforced her beliefs connecting her spirituality and the natural world, although she already had examples in her life of family members having very personal connections with the outdoors. Nancy
did not grow up attending church, and her mom would often tell her about her
grandfather’s connection to the earth:

My mom would always tell me that her dad, instead of going to church,
would go for a walk in the woods. I think I’ve sort of felt that way too, so
being outdoors, I guess maybe NELP let me know that’s okay, that’s kind
of the way I would be spiritual, or whatever. It was interesting talking to
people about spirituality. I remember talking to people and thinking, oh,
there’s a lot of options out there. So I think it might have affected it a
little bit because I had already felt more like my grandpa just being outside
is what I need. It validated that.

While this course did not necessarily monumentally shift her worldview, there is a sense
that it supported small pieces of herself that were in the process of being molded.

Interestingly, if it were not for the outdoors aspect of NELP, Nancy probably
would not have taken a course with such a focus on creative writing. She was not very
comfortable with it at the time, and still is not, though she has continued journaling
throughout the years since NELP. She appreciates the writing part of the experience as
making her a more well-rounded person, challenging her, and giving her the opportunity
to write in a less intimidating space. As a nursing student she did not need the English
credits and would have probably been too intimidated to pursue a writing course in a
structured classroom on campus.

Ultimately, for Nancy, she recalls the most important part of NELP was in the
group experience:

I think mostly it was all the interpersonal stuff that was really interesting
and that I got a lot out of. You know, I was nineteen, I was still trying to
“be myself” and not be influenced by peers that much and kind of making
that shift from teenage “gotta go with the group.” And the other thing was
since I knew my RA that told me about the program and had spoken about
it sooo much I remember getting there and feeling like, “I’m supposed to
be, like, best friends with all of these people and I’m supposed to be
getting so much out of this—am I doing enough, getting enough?” Being way too worried that I was getting enough out of it because this was supposed to be the best thing in the world, this program. And then kind of realizing that by being there with these people and having common experiences and that’s what it is, that’s how you get close and get to know each other. I had to figure out being there and what I was going to get out of it by doing it…it was really good for me to just be able to go and experience it all and then be comfortable in my own skin. It helped that a lot.

Nancy’s reflection on the interpersonal aspect of NELP is revealing for two particular reasons—first, it gave her the space to learn more about herself and to learn to be comfortable with herself among a group at a time of significant personal change. Second, it showed her the integral nature of process at NELP—that this course was steeped in sharing experiences, which then developed her connections to others. However, these considerations appear to have had a much more immediate influence on her, than her being able to directly link it to her life today. Perhaps more important in the long-term for Nancy was the lesson of being with such a diverse group of people, which showed her, “…you can have things in common with people you never thought you would and kinda just to keep a more open mind when you meet someone. I definitely took that way from it.”

As we talk more, it is apparent that Nancy compartmentalizes this experience as part of her pre-married life, an experience that is not part of her and her longtime husband’s shared past, as they had just started dating a few months before she left for NELP. However, listening to her describe her developing values and inclinations at the time of NELP as compared to her current day lifestyle, it does appear that parts of this experience—gaining more outdoor skills, reinforcing her appreciation of the outdoors
and subsequently passing that quality on to her kids, journaling and finding common bonds with a diverse array of people—have shaped perspectives she has carried through her life since.

**Richard, NELP IX (1983).** Traveling to Richard’s house means revisiting the spaces of my childhood in the Detroit suburbs. Driving to Richard’s home in a neighboring suburb where many of my childhood friends grew up, I go on autopilot on these familiar and yet not so familiar streets. Sure, that restaurant with the gray awning has been there for decades, or that frozen yogurt place we went to on Friday nights is still down the street. Along the way, I cross an intersection, an old friend I have crisscrossed hundreds of times, one that is still pocked with gobs of grainy black fudge meant to patch, not just cause more bumps and dips in the road.

Richard offered to meet at his home in a subdivision of curvy streets that snake you into calm and quiet neighborhoods, inlets behind the calm and quiet of suburbia’s frontage roads. He is welcoming as I enter his bi-level home, a traditional and unassuming brown brick home with brown shutters, one of many in a neighborhood of other bi-level brick homes with shutters. His wife briefly passes through the foyer, puttering around on this cloudy Saturday, while I hear his two daughters chitchatting in the den off of the foyer.

Richard was a student at NELP in 1983, and now at fifty his eyes remain youthful, his hair is still dark brown, though receded slightly since his NELP days, as I notice later, when we flip through his photo album from NELP, when he had a full, wavy brown head of hair. He still emotes a sense of eternal youth through his friendly eyes,
pierced ear, and smooth skin, less the obligatory crows feet that ease their way in once one passes the age of 40.

I am immediately put at ease with Richard in his home of dark polished wood floors and clean lines of white walls and white kitchen cupboards. Offering me a cup of green tea, we sit at a small round wood table in the kitchen, and I thankfully grasp this steaming mug on this damp, drizzly early spring day. A ceramic bowl encircled by painted sunny ducks is at the table’s center, holding the standard assortment of round fruits, a Blackberry phone resting on top, a reminder of today’s world as we journey decades into a past of warm memories.

“It was a soulful experience.” Richard’s calling to NELP was written on a piece of birch bark. Wanting to make new friends, he had joined a fraternity in college, feeling that it had a diverse group of people. In his own words,

One of my good friends there [in the fraternity] was telling me before one spring term he was going on this literature program in New Hampshire—that they were going to climb mountains and they were going to read poetry and it sounded great to me. So when I was living at the fraternity house that summer he sent me a letter on a piece of birch bark…So I just thought it was cool. And it was something that interested me. As soon as I saw that I said I’m signing up.

Moreover, as he was open to such an experience, Richard also found a diverse group of people at NELP:

We had people from so many different walks of life, many different majors, people from different parts of the country, different religions, different races, and everyone just came together as one while maintaining their individuality.
NELP was more than just living with roommates on campus—through the collaborative nature of the program, from cooking with and for one another, building fires on camping trips, and the like—there was a deeper sense of responsibility for one’s self and for others that was developed.

As a child, Richard had attended summer camp, and had always loved going on outdoor trips, or just playing outside in general, so the concept of a course that was steeped in the outdoors was very appealing. Moreover, the outdoor-based experiences at NELP reinforced the importance of the outdoors in his life. As we talk sitting in his kitchen, I am facing a sliding glass door than opens to a screened porch. Beyond the porch are winter’s naked maples and oaks and russet underbrush lining a ravine; though buds are nearly sprouting on this day, Richard tells me of how he loves the time of year when those trees are green, lush and thick, transforming into a dense forest.

For Richard, many of the physical challenges at NELP taught him about approaching the hills and valleys and divergent moments in life. Recounting a pivotal moment from NELP, he recollects his hiking trip up Mt. Washington. As Richard recalls,

I do remember, it was our first day up Mt. Washington. Did you know Francella? Walter Clarke, who was one of the founders, Francella was his wife, who also taught in the [University of Michigan] English Department. I was going up with Francella and her daughter Allison, who at the time was 11. And I think there were three or four other people in my group. And it was way too strenuous for Allison. So she was maybe a third up the first day’s climb and she couldn’t go anymore and we had another few hours to go. So the other fella in my group and I said, “Okay, tell you what, why don’t you just leave your pack here, climb up and we’ll go get it later.” So we made it halfway up the mountain, the two of us went back down, got the pack, alternated going back up, but it was really the first time I thought I had the stamina to do a major climb in one day.
Perhaps it is this sense of accomplishment beyond that which he had previously thought possible that has contributed to his sense of persistence, openness to risks and adventures, and acceptance of challenges. He connects these types of experiences at NELP to how he approaches challenges:

When I look back on my experience at NELP and I encounter new challenges in current day. I look back, I can say to myself, you know, it’s okay to try new things. It’s okay to open yourself up to new challenges. You don’t have to go down the same road everyday.

A decision that was influenced by NELP was his choice to take a solo-backpacking trip following college graduation through Israel and Europe—something he says he would probably not have done alone if he had not been to NELP. Perhaps it was an openness to being flexible to change his travel plans at anytime, as well as his openness to potential discomforts of flying by the seat of his pants. Perhaps it was also a deeper understanding or belief in his place and actions in the world. In Richard’s words,

When you think of everything you have to do yourself to survive out there [in the woods], it makes me think more that individuals are responsible for their own being, rather than some supreme being out there. But at the same time, you’re out there among all of these natural wonders and you think to yourself there’s no way this all came by chance, there has to be some happy medium between something that was created and something that was managed. So, I guess at the same time I felt more godly and less godly.

Today a lawyer, as he explains, “representing the downtrodden against corporate America,” Richard recollects NELP as a unique educational experience that was by far the best that he has ever had. As a political science major, he found that most of the
writing required of him in college involved more argumentative or research-type papers. NELP gave him the space to explore writing in a different way. In his words,

...through NELP, writing in a journal, writing poetry, writing creatively, I became a much more expressive writer. Which has been good in my career. I see a lot of people just try to write sounding so Latin—and I know that when I read other people’s briefs and they’re just so rote, they’re just so hard to read. So I always write creatively, even when I’m doing my work. I think the judges appreciate it [chuckling].

This is not the only connection Richard makes to the academic differences between NELP and other educational experiences. For someone who had continued his formal education to ultimately become a lawyer, he certainly understands persisting towards a goal. Outside of NELP he sees the rest of college as goal-driven—he had course requirements to complete, he needed to get a degree to go on to graduate school. Meanwhile, NELP presented a process-driven space—a place to take the time to immerse one’s self in the literature and enjoy learning. Ultimately he took away the sense of how important it is to make the time in his life to follow pursuits that he enjoys and have other interests outside of a career. Of course he has a job and a family to support, but when he makes the time to do things he enjoys he is better doing the things he has to do.

Richard looks back on NELP as a place where people’s “souls just opened up,” where people were more expressive, appreciative and loving. Richard’s reflections on NELP and life since then draw connections from his writing in his career to the space NELP provided to experiment with creative writing nearly thirty years ago. NELP opened him up to appreciating a process-driven experience, whether it is education or a life challenge, and the flexibility that may be required. Moreover, it reinforced the
importance of having pleasurable pastimes—of engaging with life beyond the straight and narrow of a career or as a breadwinner, perhaps, in his own way, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life” (Thoreau, 1983, p. 135). Perhaps greater testimony to this program is how proud Richard is that his own daughter is attending NELP this spring.

**Alex, NELP XXV (1999).** Following my thirty-minute train ride from the heart of Washington, D.C. to the suburbs of Virginia, Alex meets me at a stop near the end of the line. Now in his mid-thirties, his slender physique still retains a hint of a tall, gangly teenager, yet holds a clear adult certainty of movement, his short black hair already showing a slight speckle of gray. On this spring morning of an intermittent drizzle, brightened by the blooming pink magnolia and cherry blossom trees, we pursue a couple of cups of coffee to help awaken us on what could otherwise easily be a lazy Sunday.

Alex was a student at NELP in 1999, and exudes a contemplative nature as someone who considers his words and appreciates a discussion and sharing of ideas. A natural introvert, we take time to warm up to each other, him talking of his recent move to a new house with his wife, with whom he is expecting a child in the fall. A few years ago he moved from Michigan to pursue a job as an engineering consultant, a position far more rewarding and interesting to him than the more automated engineering position he left behind in Detroit’s auto industry.

For someone who attended the school of engineering, received a degree in engineering and then completed the requirements for an English concentration, pursuing English was, in his mind, a way to complement engineering. Especially when in class,
engineering was so intensely focused on theory, whereas his interest in creative writing in particular gave him additional skills in communication and the dialoging of ideas.

“You didn’t have the stress of meeting a deadline. You were living your work, living your studies, living your classes.” After seeing a flyer about an informational session on NELP while on his way to an engineering course, Alex was immediately attracted to the idea of being able to study, read and write in an outdoor-based environment, especially as someone who had grown up enjoying sports outside, like skiing and mountain biking. Throughout our talk on this damp, gray morning, Alex keeps returning to several connections between his experiences at NELP and his professional experiences to date. One aspect he discusses is the skill gained from the journal-based writing required at NELP:

I think the thing about that is when you’re writing in a journal there’s lack of editing, it’s more of just freestyle writing, just letting everything out without editing yourself. I think that the whole idea of just journaling and not caring about form or structure, being able to capture ideas.

Though there was not an emphasis on technical writing, Alex actually found this pen-to-paper practice of the working through the material and ideas more freeing and enjoyable than the restrictions that were often placed on him in more traditional courses in college. When talking about his consulting position as an engineer he is clearly excited about the open-ended problem solving and writing that his job requires of him. Although Alex does not necessarily journal now in terms of processing ideas and working through problems, he often thinks about the impact NELP has had on knowing what he is capable of in terms of clearing his head and engaging at length with a thought, idea or problem.
For Alex, one of the greatest takeaways from the program was in having the time to reconnect with himself personally and to be able to focus academically without the distractions of his daily life on campus.

Very much connected with this degree of engagement with material and ideas that separated NELP from other parts of his formal education was the depth one could achieve with studies when they are so integrally intertwined with life. In Alex’s words,

You were living your work, living your studies, living your classes, so you never really had to think about that [time crunch working under deadlines for class assignments in a traditional classroom schedule]. The learning in class was all day long, whereas when you’re on campus there’s much more of a dividing line between when you go to class and got other stuff going on, have to start a paper, whatever, and I think the work is probably compromised. At NELP, in that environment, you’re able to think about things all day long without as much pressure. But at the end of the day, since you don’t have the stresses of daily life you can do that in a more relaxed manner.

Further, the constant life and learning interactions with people at NELP helped develop his ability to collaborate and work well with others. Especially as a natural introvert, Alex has found that being able to collaborate with others is a valuable skill professionally, possibly even more so than the technical ability one brings. When asked about an influential or pivotal moment from the course, he immediately responds that “Get Lost Day” is an important moment. Alex compares this day immersed with a small group to all-day brainstorming sessions he often sees in his professional life when starting a new project. Existentially he always knew his experience at NELP would improve him personally and professionally, but in the past couple of years in his current
position he can see the tangible effects of this course, from both the collaborative nature of his job and amount of writing that is required.

In part, Alex found the setting at NELP to present an opportunity to develop deep relationships with his peers, something he found much more difficult in a typical classroom setting. When he considers personal relationships today, especially in terms of how, for example, we are often distracted by our phones at dinner than focused on the companionship of a friend, he is even more reflective of the significance of the community at NELP:

NELP forced you to strip away a lot of the, whether it’s technology or consumerism, you’re just in the woods more or less studying so I think it strips away a lot of the veneer of everyday life that you come across and you can’t shed sometimes I feel like. So that definitely changes how I view things.

Once the veneer of everyday life is stripped, the emerald curtain has been raised, perhaps it is a keener awareness of the potential in relationships beyond socialized superficialities that is developed. Perhaps it is this simpler, outdoor-based life and conjunction with readings that reinforced his personal philosophies:

I wouldn’t say I’m a particularly spiritual person, definitely not a religious person. I just always found beauty in the outdoors and I think that’s inevitable with NELP, so I think that reinforced it. But, in terms of Thoreau and Emerson, that made a profound impact on me, their philosophies are something I respect, but it’s hard to live by them nowadays with technology and the state of the world.

NELP also gave him various outdoor skills he did not have prior to the course. On a rigorous three-day hiking trip to Franconia Ridge he learned the basics of camping,
how to pack for a hiking trip and how to handle one’s self in the backcountry. Beyond the significant physical and emotional challenges this trip brought to the group, he gained the skills to independently take his own camping and hiking trips. Further, components of the course like this one reiterated how important the outdoors is to his life and how he plans on integrating the outdoors into his future children’s lives.

For Alex, one of the most significant qualities of NELP was the seamless blend of living and learning. This way of life lifted the pressure from having to perform or produce multiple assignments for multiple classes on such a regimented schedule that he was so used to experiencing in Ann Arbor. Consequently, he found himself able to engage more deeply with writing, further develop his social intelligence and learn more about the outdoors; these are all skills and notions he has continued to use in his personal and professional life.

Ella, NELP XXXI (2005). After meeting with Alex, I rode the train back to D.C. to visit Ella at her home in the city. She lives in a second-floor apartment with her fiancé, whom she will marry this fall. Their home is a comfortable size by city standards, the living room with a wall of large windows that overlook beautiful historic row houses and mature trees lining a quiet street. By this time the gray clouds are beginning to lift and through the large panes the sunshine gradually brightens the room, as we sit on her plush couches, delighting in a moment to share stories and together revisit the spring of 2005.

I first met Ella at NELP seven years ago, and have not seen her since the summer following NELP. Though we had many common friends during college, our paths had never crossed before then. As with that time, and now, in her late twenties, she bubbles
with a curiosity for the world around her, easy to laugh or cry and reveal her emotional truth. Perhaps it is this charm of openness, wonder and wit that is so romancing to those who meet her. Her personality is enhanced, of course, by her natural beauty, and on this day, brown waves of hair frame porcelain skin and cascade over her shoulders, her navy blue cotton dress hugging curves that exist in all of the right places.

“It emboldened me.” Ella, after seeing a flyer for NELP in the English Department, was immediately intrigued by the idea of being outdoors and studying, as well as meeting like-minded people. As someone who had attended summer camp when she was younger, she was relatively comfortable with the outdoors, yet would only develop a greater ease with the outdoors and a comfort with being dirty while at NELP.

In Ella’s eyes, attending this course was the first significant decision she independently made for herself—her parents were not necessarily the literary types, and her older sister would have probably not been interested in an academic course so deeply rooted to the earth. After joining the sorority of which her older sister was a member during her freshman year, Ella recognized that she had committed most of her social interactions to those within her sorority. While she did enjoy that experience, she was also interested in meeting different people who were more academically and intellectually connected to her interests, especially as an English major. For Ella, at the end of her sophomore year, the community experience at NELP was a conduit to connecting with such people:

I think NELP was the first time—it sounds like I really led this sheltered life before and it didn’t feel that way, but in many ways it was—this was the first time I met people who were really smart and really talented, my
same age or a couple years older, a couple years younger. I think I started to respect my peers more.

At NELP, Ella felt she had the time to develop deep relationships with others in such a condensed amount of time, in part because there were no technological or outside social distractions. As we talk further, she displays a tenderness when she admits to a desire for an increased intimacy with her current friendships. She finds this especially problematic living in Washington, D.C., with everyone being so involved with his or her work, and perhaps also in light of the general nature of how many of us in this country today live very separated personal lives.

NELP’s nature as a place for the co-construction of knowledge also contributed to her self-confidence and admiration for her fellow students and teachers, although these lines of student and teacher were often blurred. This educational experience often felt a world away from her other classes on campus in Ann Arbor, as she explains how,

By the end of NELP the students were the teachers. That was really big for me. I think I just looked at some of my classes differently after that. There were still teachers like Ralph Williams\(^3\) or these big lecturing professors that obviously had a lot to teach and I didn’t see myself as their peer in any way, it was a different type of class. I liked learning from my peers, I thought that was really interesting. I liked all the teachers. I liked seeing everyone try to do it and everyone would really up their game for whatever class they were teaching.

Perhaps even more dramatic was her shift in perspective of analysis and discussion. While at NELP she found herself becoming a more fluid writer, as well as

\(^3\) Professor Williams is renowned professor at the University of Michigan who taught classes on Shakespearean, Medieval and Renaissance literature, among others. He characteristically has the presence of a performer “on stage” during lectures.
having an increased openness to new ideas and interpretations, which also gave her the opportunity to write and speak more honestly. In Ella’s words,

In Ann Arbor…I had a formula figured out for those sorts of assignments. But for these [NELP] assignments—like, read and think about this before you come to talk with your peers about it—is very different, there’s no formula for it. So when I read through what I wrote before class…I think I was looking less analytically for the right answer, because I knew it was more of exploring the possibilities. Because I didn’t think there was one right thing to say. Like I knew a NELP class is not about getting to that one nugget and class is over…There’s not a right interpretation of a poem…As NELP went on it became more okay to just say whatever but I think the things I was saying were more honest. As opposed to my English major formula, what I thought was the right answer.

This increased openness to an exploration of alternative possibilities, new ways of writing and expressing herself was apparent to Ella following her experience at NELP. It served as an opportunity to explore her artistic inclinations and way of being. It also encouraged her to live her truth more freely. For Ella, it was the personal connection with one of her teachers at NELP that really opened her eyes, and she tears up as she recounts her experience. This particular teacher, from her heart, encouraged Ella to truly share herself with others, as they would clearly recognize how remarkable a person she is. It is from this conversation she can draw a direct line to how she considers really being herself around a new group of people, in particular. As Ella explains, “I see NELP…it was totally the moment when I became, when I decided to be myself. And I didn’t know what that was and I’m still in some ways just figuring that out.” Even in the short-term, returning from that summer she was emboldened, feeling like she could do anything she wanted and would truly be okay. The following year she planned her own
study abroad experience in Buenos Aires and, after NELP, she knew she would truly be okay, that it would all come into place. And it did.

Ultimately, perhaps it was that blend of living and learning that gave Ella greater insight into literature and the choices she must make in her life. At NELP she realized that she liked thinking about things, analyzing, and collaboratively being creative and discussing ideas with people. Though at the time she had no idea of what she wanted to do specifically career-wise, she can connect those more focused ideations to the choices she later made to travel down a pathway as a radio producer, as she says, “…analyzing things and thinking about things and being creative and discussing with people, sort of a collaborative thing, that’s all in what I do now.”

While NELP contributed to her way of interacting with literature and ideas throughout her classes following NELP, as well as the graduate program in documentary studies that she participated in a few years following college, she identifies NELP as a profoundly personal moment in her educational and life experiences. It was here where she took the chance to express her true self, to embrace the creative nature of ruminating on ideas and to cultivate deep connections with others. As Ella surmises, “It’s funny, I hardly think about it as a college experience, it feels really different to me.”

Emergent Themes

The overall intention of this study has been to look at NELP’s long-term influence on participants. I then used sub-research questions to examine how certain personal characteristics or experiences have affected the degree of the program’s influence, as well as what specific components of the course were considered significant to the effect on
these participants. As a way to structure this study, I specifically focused on skill and knowledge development, as well as the development of character strengths. Portraiture has provided a pathway to emergent themes as to what former NELPers have taken from this experience and still apply to their lives years later.

Participant impact. Although each participant interviewed embodies a unique and personal experience, many commonalities between their experiences did emerge. With some exception to Nancy, all participants were able to make direct connections from their experience at NELP to their lives today, whether related to the personal or professional arena. From the interviews, four distinct themes emerged relating to the program’s long-term significance: that it nurtured creativity, increased collaboration skills, developed self-confidence/self-knowledge and reinforced the importance of having a relationship with the outdoors. Each of these benefits is further illustrated below.

Nurtured creativity.

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins. The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. (Dillard, 1990, p. 3).

All participants discussed the significance of being able to explore their own writing creatively, with this course often profoundly challenging and evolving their
writing and cognitive skills. For the majority of this study’s participants, this created a deep influence on how they approach tasks in their careers today.

At first glance, one may assume that an engineer or lawyer would not necessarily benefit from developing their creative writing skills. While Ella, as a radio producer, is constantly writing and creatively considering, examining and approaching new material, Richard and Alex also both find themselves using writing skills that were encouraged and cultivated at NELP throughout their careers, especially in professions that are not commonly thought of as artistic or creative endeavors. As Richard, a lawyer, explains, “…when I read other people’s briefs and they’re just so rote, they’re just so hard to read,” he seems somewhat disappointed that other professionals in his field don’t embody the same degree of imagination or originality as he does in his documents. Lightheartedly, he describes his own more creatively written briefs as more enjoyable for the judges to read; however, I imagine there is a grain of truth to that.

In a similar fashion, Alex finds the free exploration of his writing through journaling in particular, as a method that helped him develop his skills in exploring, synthesizing and capturing ideas through his writing. At the time of NELP, journaling helped him work through material precisely because there was a, “…lack of editing, it’s more of just freestyle writing, just letting everything out without editing yourself.” He finds that being able to independently work through ideas has benefited his work today, as his job demands open-ended problem solving, as well as strong writing skills. These are qualities he feels he did not necessarily gain from his engineering degree that was
steeped in theory and little else, nor through most of his other writing classes, which were often oriented towards technical writing.

Further, even when made somewhat uncomfortable by the idea of exploring one’s creativity, both Nancy and Ella found a benefit to the exploratory, reflective and freestyle writing for which NELP allowed. Although Nancy was uncomfortable with the writing process at NELP at the time, in retrospect, she realizes it was an experience that allowed her to explore her writing without being intimidated in a more structured setting. Further, she has continued to maintain a journal since then. For Ella, NELP dispelled her previous formulaic English major training that often led her aiming for the “right answer.” At NELP, the openness for all possibilities, both related to her writing and skills of analysis, has allowed her to feel more free in her own writing and thought process. For example, a writing prompt may ask for students to assess their physical and emotional experiences on a three-day trip in Acadia National Park while reflecting on a character’s experience in Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (see Appendix G). Or there may be an assignment to independently research a topic or concept as presented in Thoreau’s *Walden*, documenting findings and reflections in one’s journal. These types of assignments provide opportunities for an individual to imaginatively explore their lived experiences, those of others and intellectualize the congruence or divergence between them.

Aric Knuth, who was a student at NELP in 1997, has been teaching at NELP since 1998, is the current director at NELP and teaches courses at the University of
Michigan, describes these developed writing skills as a result of the close reading that NELP demands. The changes in one’s writing is reflective of the program having, “…built their thoughts and it built their critical reading skills” (A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012). The experiences at NELP encourage deep, nuanced and personal reflection and open exploration. These participant reflections show that such experiences are beneficial to someone who has since pursued a career in a field that involves creativity in not only her writing but in exploring new topics to pursue as parts of radio show content, as well as for someone who has pursued a career that is considered more conventionally structured.

**Increased collaboration skills.** All participants talk about the depth of relationships that this program allowed for, as well as the different types of people they met through this course. In part, each participant refers to the fact that one shares a multitude of experiences with fellow classmates at NELP, from daily classes to hiking trips to cooking meals together, finding that, “The more you do with someone, the more you get to know them, in different ways” (Ella). As Richard explains,

> At NELP you certainly had to rely on other people, you had to trust other people, you had to be responsible for yourself. It was a mutual effort. Cooking together and building fires together and helping each other out you really got a sense there of what it was like to be responsible for other people, and rely on other people for things I needed help with…We had people from so many different walks of life, many different majors, people from different parts of the country, different religions, different races, and everyone just came together as one while maintaining their individuality.

In a NELP document from 2011, student responsibilities and academic requirements are delineated. The document expresses the importance of various types of participation—
from partaking in completing community chores that have been assigned to one’s work
group, to participating in each weekly trip, assigned journal groups and required classes.
In the moment, for this course to function, it clearly requires members of the community
to have or start to develop certain character strengths such as citizenship, social
intelligence or self-regulation to which Richard alludes. These form a sort of web of
understanding that Richard refers to in the “mutual effort” to which all NELPers must contribute.

Further, this aspect of the course that relies on functioning as a small community
often helped participants develop greater empathic skills and social intelligence, and the
understanding that people who may not look like them or be from a similar background
can still share common interests and values. For Nancy, it planted the seed that
encourages her to this day to, “…keep a more open mind when you meet someone.” For
Ella, NELP was the first time she really connected on a deeper level with peers with a
range of personal, academic and intellectual interests and talents, leading to a greater
respect for members of her generation. Most mention the physical lack of superficiality
at NELP as also creating a much more open and real community— it allows for a time to
not focus on doing one’s makeup, or hair or dealing with appearance in general, which
then, “strips away a lot of the veneer of everyday life” (Alex). The female participants,
in particular, refer to this greater openness as also contributing to an increased comfort
with their own personal aesthetic.

Although Ella mentions the collaborative nature of her current work, Alex makes
a direct connection from the interpersonal skills he developed while at NELP to his
current career, specifically. Perhaps it is in correlation to his naturally introverted nature that he felt the group experience at NELP helped him in terms of collaborating with others professionally. As he has experienced various positions in the field of engineering over the past decade, he now sees the ability to collaborate as, “Probably more important in a lot of regards than to the technical ability you may bring.”

Overall it appears that the significant long-term takeaways for most participants are an open-mindedness when meeting people, as well as the importance of being able to work well with different people.

*Increased self-confidence and self-knowledge.*

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true. (Frost, *Into My Own*)

Not only does the community aspect of NELP impact participants’ interpersonal skills and understand, but it also engages participants to examine their own skills and desires. For Nancy and Ella, in particular, they found the external social interactions to influence an open-mindedness towards other people, while the course also made them reflect inward, helping them discover more about themselves and gain confidence in their own abilities and instincts. Both women specifically mention that their experience at NELP was at a crucial time during which they were transitioning into a more mature, self-assuredness of adulthood. This was a time when they were making very personal decisions about who they were and how they wanted to engage with the world. For Nancy, she gained a greater self-understanding and validation of her own instinctive beliefs while working through the diverse ways of living that were presented and discussed at NELP. For Ella, part of the impact on self-confidence was from the personal
connection with one of her teachers at NELP that helped her find comfort with her sense of self. After reading part of Ella’s journal, the teacher encouraged Ella to, “be you and be big.” Further, the assigned readings reflect this philosophy of authenticity, for Thoreau also expresses, “Say what you have to say, not what you ought” (p. 376). As Ella admits, “I felt very centered, that’s how I walked away from it [NELP] feeling.”

If we look at Joplin’s (1995) model of the experiential education cycle we can take this moment in the example of Ella’s experience as one of support (establishing sufficient sense of security throughout for learner to take risks), as well as that of feedback (given at any point(s) throughout the cycle so that learner can move ahead). This external acknowledgement of one’s truth is often validating for the individual and the experience, reflections or perspectives he or she has.

Moreover, NELP demands a significant degree of personal reflection, in spoken dialogue or in a journal that is a place to, “…write THROUGH their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, literary problems” (Assessing Academic Performance at NELP, n.d.). As stated in the same document, there is an expectation for a student at NELP to make, “…connections among texts, herself, landscapes, and community.” Thus, this course naturally encourages a deeper knowing and cultivated expression of self through also reflecting on the external. This can be seen through the validation and reinforcement of Alex and Nancy’s spiritual connection to the outdoors, to Richard’s deeper cognizance of the balance of self-determination and destiny through interacting with the outdoors so closely.
For all participants, there was a sense of accomplishment of some sort that carried them through endeavors beyond NELP, whether this idea of having a greater capability was gained through developing personal connections with others, gaining outdoor skills that contributed to a sense of independence, or encountering and successfully overcoming challenges on a hiking trip or NELP itself. For instance, many of the outdoor trips that occurred during NELP (such as hiking Mt. Washington or whitewater canoeing), engaged Richard with various physical challenges that let him to see that his stamina and strength, as well as adaptability, were greater than he had previously thought. Today he draws a connection to those experiences and his openness to new challenges, which reflects a confidence in his ability to engage with something that may push him.

Reinforced a lifelong relationship with the outdoors.

Sometimes the mountain is hidden from me in veils of cloud, sometimes I am hidden from the mountain in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue, when I forget or refuse to go down to the shore or a few yards up the road, on a clear day, to reconfirm that witnessing presence. (Levertov, *Witness*)

For all participants, their experience at NELP reinforced the connection they need to maintain with the natural world in order to lead lives that are satisfying in all areas. Each had had some outdoor experiences prior to NELP, whether it was Nancy’s experiences growing up hiking with her family during summer vacations, Alex’s experiences skiing or mountain biking, or those of Richard and Ella, who both attended residential summer camps for at least a couple of seasons when they were growing up.
This is not to say that they were all at the same level of comfort with living in rustic cabins or camping; rather, they had had previous exposure, knew they enjoyed activities outdoors and looked forward to a course in which literature and outdoor experiences would be significant components.

NELP generally impacted participants’ perspectives towards the outdoors in two ways: first, by improving their outdoor skills through weekly camping excursions in particular (that involved setting up camp, packing for hiking trips, equipment needs, etc.) and, second, by providing meaningful experiences rooted in the outdoors. In a NELP document delineating student responsibilities and academic requirements it references that students will, from these trips in particular, “…learn to read the environment and landscape as texts and develop awareness of self and place.” Through a close reading of place, there also comes an understanding of the relationship between one’s self and the environs.

At the level of skill development, all participants say that experiences at NELP gave them the more specific knowledge to be able to plan their own outdoor excursions, as well as just learning the tools of “how to handle yourself” (Alex), as he did through his hiking trip on Franconia Ridge. As Nancy says, “I just learned more about how to be more independent and what to do in order to enjoy the outdoors.” Thus, for Nancy and Alex in particular, this supported the ways in which they have interacted with the outdoors through hiking or camping trips since NELP. Essentially, while they began NELP already having an appreciation for the outdoors, they left NELP with the ability to take more initiative with their subsequent interactions with the outdoors.
For all participants, the general richness of the outdoor experience at NELP, from living close to the land, to studying the works of Thoreau to hiking mountains, increased their comfort with the natural world and reinforced how important a connection to the outdoors is for them and their current families. For example, Alex shares that NELP, “…solidified hiking, camping, that’s always part of my life. That’s something I always want to do, my wife’s into that, that’s something I want our kids to be into, so we’ll go on similar type trips.” For Nancy, NELP “accentuated” how important being outside is for her as a person, which is also a similar perspective to that of Richard. For most participants, the experience of reading literature that was often steeped in place while they were outdoors in that very region added to a depth of their perception and connection with the natural world and literature combined. As Richard says,

…it’s one thing to read Robert Frost while you’re sitting in a classroom. It’s quite another thing to be in the very area where it was being written. You can sit in the trees. I think it gives it a whole new, you get a whole new appreciation for it.

Essentially, NELP increases one’s outdoor skills and experiences with the outdoors. This then leads to a greater comfort with the natural world, as well as an awareness and consideration of what the outdoors means to participants. Ultimately, for most participants, NELP provided outdoor experiences significant and influential to how they perceive or interact with the outdoors today.

**Participant characteristics.** All participants use the word “open,” or a derivative thereof, to describe a necessary condition for participants to be positively impacted by this program. However, it is apparent that there are three kinds of openness at play: one that is receptive to new experiences and challenges, one that is a willingness to interact in
various types of intellectual and social relationships and one that is the ability to self-
reflect and articulate such internal processes.

Reflecting on her experience as a student, Ella states that, “Everyone needs to be
on board,” and accept the collective decision to be a part of a community that operates
quite differently from life on campus, as well as is disconnected from much of the
external world. Alex explains in more detail how,

You really have to be open, because I think NELP requires you to be, you
know, in addition to reading material and discussing the text, there’s
actually a lot of self-reflection and journaling and you have to be
vulnerable to a degree in terms of how you share your experiences.

There is a lot that NELP demands of a student: one must step away from his or her
regular life on campus, unplug from technology, be flexible to new community norms
and accept potential physical, emotional or intellectual challenges.

In speaking further with long-time staff members, their perspectives align with
participant sentiments. Both Nels Christensen (NELP faculty since 2001) and current
NELP director Aric Knuth find that intellectual curiosity is a necessary participant
quality, and that they as staff, “…search for people who seem mature enough to conduct
themselves with openness. Not necessarily emotional openness, but intellectual
openness” (A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012). Ella confirms this
position from her own experience as a participant and that one would ideally be interested
in thinking about and analyzing ideas. She further explains that someone who prefers not
to dig too deep and merely enjoy the experience would be a personality that would be
challenged at NELP.
Although Richard expresses, “I don’t know how this program can’t positively impact a participant,” he also thinks that, “it’s more on the participant than the program that the participant has to want to open up and explore the outside and explore within. And this program is there for that type of person.” When we return to the topic, he renegotiates that not everyone is going to be a match with this program, and that there must be a degree of interest in this type of experience to begin with. He goes on to discuss that this interest involves having a literariness, an appreciation of one’s surroundings and a social and intellectual liberalness.

An initial interest in this type of course that is far removed from an English class on campus is conducive to one’s ability to be immersed and impacted by the course. Thus it appears that there are three particular kinds of openness that are necessary, although they appear interconnected: one is an openness to exploring different experiences and challenges, which is exemplified in the act of being “on board” and stepping outside of one’s typical way of living to pursue the unique intellectual and personal demands and way of living NELP. The second type is an openness towards connecting with others—this can be seen through actions like being receptive to discussion with, collaboration with and, in general, various types of interactions with others and through interacting and collaborating with others for whom one may or may not have an immediate affinity. The third kind of openness is seen in an openness of self; that is to say, one should be able to both internally reflect on experiences or texts and be receptive to sharing their own cognitive ruminations.
**Program components.** As part of this study, although I focus on the long-term effects on participants, I also find it important to consider the actual qualities of the program as a way to provide further implications for effective practice or program design. For all interviewed participants, the aspects that appear to most resonate as integral components of this type of program were that of being a part of an intimate community, being in a program oriented towards the process of the educational experience and that the curriculum and experience was steeped in place.

**Collaborative community.** The fact that the course each spring creates a new intimate community seems requisite to the depth of the NELP experience. In part, the nature of this course’s closed community and sharing of numerous common experiences lends to developing deeper interpersonal relationships, as well as social skills. Further, the absence of external or technological distractions also keeps one present to the experience, relationships and process. I am reminded of the permeating essence of the community setting when I visit this year’s NELP in May. The camaraderie is palpable as the sun creeps westward over Sebago Lake, a bold fire hanging above the ripples, and I hear Nels’ guitar howling over the din from across the camp dining hall. Wood tables and benches are filled with discussion and reading and journaling, while other students and staff are visible through the pass-through to the kitchen, as they chop vegetables and hover over the stove. Garlic and cornbread simmer in the ether, while silverware ting and plastic plates clack. This is the hubbub of a meal—and yet it is not simply a meal—in the NELP community. It is vibrant and infused with many types of connections between one another and a perceptible energy for the now and for that which is to come.
Ella and Alex, in particular, compare the unlimited nature of interpersonal interactions as to what they experience now. For instance, Alex finds that one of the most important parts of NELP, “…was the ability to just grab your sleeping bag and go sleep outside with a friend and sit up and talk. That’s something you really don’t get to do anymore, now I feel like it’s so hard to coordinate with my friends.” Similarly, Ella describes this ease in being connected to members of the community while at NELP, while experiencing this current difficulty in, “…feeling content with the intimacy of my friendships [now] because things are how they are living in a city.” At NELP there are few lines to the external world, there is no technology beyond a rare light switch or the kitchen stove—there are no distractions beyond the immediate experience. In comparison to the rest of life, this allows for unlimited time to develop in-person relationships with other, and to share a great number of common experiences in such a short time span, which current staff members confirm as a deeper development of emotional and intellectual intimacy that is developed.

*Process-driven education.*

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains…Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in…(Solnit, 2005, p. 29-30)

There is an overall sense from all participants that NELP was an experience unlike the rest of their formal postsecondary education, and one likely reason for this is
the process-oriented experiential nature of the program. We can get an idea of participants’ impressions from Richard’s reflection in that, “NELP was never goal-driven. NELP was straight learning and appreciating and just being.” When he compares this course to the rest of his college and graduate education, he found most of his traditional education as goal-driven and often a means to an end.

Alex also refers to this contrast between NELP and the rest of his courses on campus, yet uses slightly different language, going further in-depth to describe this different relationship between life and one’s studies at NELP:

You were living your work living your studies, living your classes…The learning in class was all day long, whereas when you’re on campus there’s much more of a dividing line between when you go to class and get other stuff going on, have to start a paper, whatever, and I think the work is probably compromised. At NELP, in that environment, you’re able to think about things all day long without as much pressure. But at the end of the day, since you don’t have the stresses of daily life you can do that in a more relaxed manner. Whereas back in Ann Arbor I don’t think I ever had the chance to clear my head and focus on a paper willingly and as happily as I did at NELP.

This reflection demonstrates the possibility for an increased appreciation or love of learning through this integrated living and learning community. Further, when long-time staff members discuss intentions of the course from day one, it is not only for students to take ownership of their education, but to further develop lifelong learners. Rachael Cohen, who has been teaching at NELP since 1995, describes the impact of the interconnectedness of life and learning and the particular awareness of this at NELP:

…learning takes place everywhere and forever, it isn’t just confined to certain times and spaces in your life…[At NELP.] Sometimes we sit outside on a rock, sometimes we sit in the kitchen and make food while we’re having class and then we go on these trips where we burst that circle and we go out in the mountain and we’re having class pretty much
continuously when we hiking, when we’re eating, we’re reciting and memorizing poems in the vans, there’s no end to it, class doesn’t exist in a boundary of time or space…whatever it is. Just like when you were fussy when you were a kid when your carrots and your meat touched, and your mom said it all goes into the same stomach. All of those things that you experience in your life—everything you read and feel and see, it goes in your same mind and your same heart….You don’t just learn at college at age 20 and then go on with your life. You’re having your life before that and you go on having your learning after. I’m almost 49 and I’m still learning, I’m still in school everyday, every minute. And NELP allows me to remember that over and over again. Maybe I’d still do that in my normal life, NELP is making that constant shift or reworkings of what it means to be myself what it means to be a citizen of the planet. I think that’s the key to it really. (R. Cohen, personal communication, May 13, 2012).

Ella similarly expresses the way that NELP connects literature and life beyond just studying it in a classroom limited by time span and place:

…you don’t learn until someone tells you outside of any class that literature is not just to be studied it’s to be lived and it’s philosophy and it should be part of life, and can be part of life and that’s what NELP is. So those books are much more *internalized*.

By integrating literature, philosophy and the like into a lifestyle, and not just limiting a discussion to a classroom a couple of times a week, more depth can be achieved with personally relating to and understanding the literature, while also developing a stronger discourse community.

Further, at NELP there is the underlying concept that, “…we build the academic community here *together* [researcher emphasis]” (NELP XXXVI Program Responsibilities and Academic Requirements, n.d.). It is a weekly, daily and minute-by-minute process of the community members’ contributions that create the course experience itself.
Even observations of a class on Frederick Douglass’ narrative of his life reveals a depth of intellectual probing and social construction of knowledge that arises out of discussion and not necessarily teacher expertise. On a cool May morning I join a small group for a class. We sit on a mishmash of wooden benches and Adirondack chairs in a wood slat building of scuffed floors, dust flickered by sunlight that streams through the hemlock and pine trees just outside the screened windows. Here we have the time to work through ideas, with few distractions beyond the immediate. Discussion circles around close readings and individual reflections. Even when the class officially ends at 10:30 a.m., a handful of students remain to further grapple with the concepts of invisible structures that surrounded Douglass’ life and those that envelop our own lives today.

The course structures—from limiting the more formal class discussions that occur while at NELP to seven students, to writing assignments for students to connect to readings and philosophies, to interconnected living and learning spaces, to regional outdoor experiences throughout the course that also connect to literature and personal experience—demonstrate an overall intentionality in the importance of experience and learning throughout.

*Steeped in a place.*

Through this piece of rough pasture ran a huge shape of stone like the great backbone of an enormous creature. At the end, near the woods, we could climb up on it and walk along to the highest point; there above the circle of pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in, —that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give. (Jewett, 1896, p. 70)
Very much related to the process-oriented essence of NELP was the importance of place to former participants. This is for two main reasons: one is the physical challenge, the other being the interaction with literature that is very much tied to the New England region while living in that area.

As Ella explains,

You need to be made uncomfortable by something and at NELP there were so many discomforts, which is really the outdoor piece and time of year. That creativity is brought on by discomfort and needing to solve a problem. At NELP, you’re so without your usual way of doing things.

Nels Christensen (2009) refers to this concept as a pedagogy of disorientation, which he writes of in reference to, “The physical disorientation that NELP students feel upon arriving at the wooded and stony camp where they will read, write, work, and live together, largely without amenities such as electricity and heat” (p. 213), which lends to their,

Having been forced to adapt to a world quite different than the one they left in Ann Arbor, the students realize, at the very least, that there is more than one way to do things; consequently, they begin to question the inevitability and logic of their own decisions, values, and ideas. (p. 214)

This relinquishing of one’s normal way of interacting with the world also converses with certain readings that may be disorienting in their own right.

Living in the woods in simple cabins constructed of wood planks or camping forces one to interact with a certain discomfort on a constant basis. Especially during the spring in Maine this can be very challenging, while also connecting one to the change and growth that springtime naturally embodies. This is an inherent part of this program, as also exemplified by one staff member’s reflection on assessment at NELP:
Two words that I think about when I think about grading at NELP are *challenge* and *discomfort*. The project of NELP is an experiment in living, learning, and living as learning, and to that end, I believe that learning happens when our comfort zones are intruded upon, or punctured, when we let out our stale air so that the fresh can fill its place. We are cold. We sit on hard places. How do we accept these facts and think through them. (Assessing Academic Performance at NELP, n.d.)

The challenge and discomfort are connected to realms physical, emotional and intellectual and such a learning and living experience feels quite different than how a typical classroom atmosphere often does.

The other integral piece is that of reading literature that reflects the region and was written by those who have inhabited the region. As Richard reflects,

There’s nothing like going on site and reading things where they were written. It’s one thing to read Robert Frost when you’re sitting in a classroom. It’s quite another thing to be in the very area where it was being written.

Alex’s consideration of NELP’s, “…manner of living reflected in the subject matter” reflects a similar impression. To read poems by Frost, or more philosophical musings of Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson takes on a different meaning when interacting so closely with the same land of which they write. There is a tangible feeling of walking over mottled rocks and living simply, walking lands near that of the walks of Thoreau or Frost, or passing traditional New England farmhouses and visiting Emily Dickinson’s home, actually seeing the view from her window. Interacting with the region provides a visceral connection and deeper understanding of that which is being written about or that which surrounded the writer.
Summary

"It was so much more important than everything else I did in college.” (Ella)

The results from this study provide insight into the benefits of a program like NELP that thoroughly integrates place, community and outdoor experiences with regional literature and creative writing. These stories belong to four former NELPers, most of who still find the experience, whether it was seven years ago or three decades ago, as a significant life and educational experience. The portraits of each participant and the dialogue relating to the emergent themes and common perspectives is an attempt to both convey their individual experiences, while connecting shared perspectives to lend insight to the nature of the course, as well. That which follows places these findings within the context of current literature.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to garner insight into the long-term implications of a course that integrates academics and outdoor experiential education at the college level. In utilizing the voices of four former participants in particular who had passed through NELP at some point during its 37 years of existence, the personal stories reflecting on NELP’s longstanding influence emerged. Although their perceptions are singular, they often echo one another resonating the significance this course has had in their lives. Further, these spoken stories were enriched by course documents and conversations with long-time NELP faculty.

This chapter discusses the results to this study’s research questions in terms of current literature, as well as implications for practice and further research. I begin by discussing the long-term impact and learning that resulted in terms of the emergent themes of nurtured creativity, increased collaboration skills, developed self-confidence/self-knowledge and the reinforcement of the importance of having a relationship with the outdoors. I then discuss participant characteristics that are conducive to having a successful experience in this program, which include having the interest to deeply engage with this type of program, and an openness to new experiences, relationships and self-reflection. Following this, I discuss the components of the program
that appear key to its implementation, especially in terms of its community setting, process orientation and place-based element. I then discuss implications for practice and further research, as well as this study’s limitations.

**Findings**

Through this study, former NELP participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives experiences related to this program, contributing to literature on the implications of outdoor experiential programming in general. Most of the themes that emerged with regards to the effects of such a program do support previous findings of outdoor-based programs (for example, Gass et al.’s 2003 17-year retrospective of a freshman wilderness orientation that found long-term influences on participants’ careers and personal values and skills, or Ward & Yoshino’s 2007 analysis of short-term university outdoor skills courses that included themes relating to interpersonal, intrapersonal and environmental relationships). Further, this study expands the body of literature to include the effects for former participants many years and even decades later, as well as on outdoor experiential courses that are also academically oriented.

**Long-term participant impact.** Four distinct themes emerged relating to the program’s long-term significance: that it nurtured creativity, increased collaboration skills, developed self-confidence/self-knowledge and reinforced the importance of having a relationship with the outdoors.

**Increased collaboration skills.** All participants reflected on the significant influence their experience at NELP has had on their interpersonal skills and/or relationships. They also reflected on the inherent nature of the intimate self-reliant
community of NELP, which was conducive to developing related skills, as is reflected in the literature that discusses the impact of the often small-sized, intimate community of outdoor-based programs (Miller, 2001; Sibthorp, 2003). Perhaps most interesting is the very similar alignment (even in participant quotes) to Gass et al.’s (2003) findings of the long-term effects of a freshman wilderness orientation program and the profound impact of the unique community these types of programs produce in developing relationships with others. Participant observations, such as Alex’s note that being, “…in the woods…strips away a lot of the veneer of everyday life that you come across and you can’t shed sometimes” also parallels that, “simple, stripped-down social world” (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000, p. 46) referenced in other observations from literature on college-level wilderness academic courses.

When more specifically analyzed in terms of character strength development, participant reflections such as Alex’s thoughts on how the course has influenced his ability and awareness of the importance of open dialogue and collaboration at work, Ella’s greater respect for members of her generation or Nancy’s increased openness to those who may not look like her or have a similar background as her, exemplify the open-mindedness, social intelligence and citizenship that were taken away from this experience, an effect that has lasted many years later for all of these participants. This corresponds with reports from current literature on similar types of programs’ impacts on interpersonal skills, relationships and assumptions of others (Gass et al., 2003; Kellert, 1998; Ward & Yoshino, 2007).
It should also be noted that while participants spoke of the significance of interacting with others at NELP who may be very different from them, this does raise the question as to what type of diversity it is to which they refer. While participants overall discussed the impact of being a part of the NELP community has had on their perspectives, this also raises the issue of participant diversity, or lack thereof. Throughout his fifteen years with NELP, Knuth has found this program to attract primarily White upper middle class students and students are often self-selecting based on the perception of what type of person would attend such a program and/or affordability. This is an issue he finds to be one of the limitations of this program; during his tenure with NELP, he has tried to publicize the course itself to university communities beyond the English department, as well as has instituted multiple partial and full-ride scholarships, even.

Thus, this poses a conundrum when this study’s findings demonstrate that participants perceive significant diversity in their NELP experience, and such diversity appears to influence qualities such as open-mindedness towards others and collaborative skills they gain for the long-term. However, through further discussion with Knuth, Christensen and Cohen (N. Christensen, personal communication, May 12, 2012; R. Cohen, personal communication, May 13, 2012; A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012) there is often a lacking of a type of diversity that is racial, socio-economic and/or degree concentration-related. In discussing this further with the current director of NELP (A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012), it is likely the very intimacy
that this program demands that impacts this student perception of interpersonal relationships. In his words,

They become very intimate emotionally and intellectually and their differences are magnified because of the amount that they know each other. So I suspect that they seem very different to each other even though on paper they’re similar.

While there are multiple kinds of diversity beyond race, socio-economic status or college major, this lack of diversity “on paper” is not just a NELP-related issue—Knuth also finds this to be an issue within the English department at the University of Michigan, as well. Furthermore, this is also linked to institutional composition, as the University-at-large is made up of a majority percentage of White students, as well as a majority of students from families, at minimum, of a middle class socio-economic background (University of Michigan Factbook, 2011). Thus, while this study demonstrates the enduring influence of closely interacting and engaging with people in general, for a program like NELP to have even more types of diversity, from academic concentration to ethnicity to socio-economic background and beyond, there is the potential for even more exploration in this realm.

Reinforced a lifelong relationship with the outdoors. This study’s findings of an influence on one’s lifelong relationship with the outdoors is also very much reflected in current research. Related research primarily focuses on the more immediate impact of a

---

4 For instance, University of Michigan undergraduate student survey respondent demographics since 1998 hover between being an undergraduate student body composed of 71.9% to 76.3% White students, while about 80% of students come from families with an estimated annual income above $60,000 and about 60% of students come from families with an estimated annual income above $100,000 (University of Michigan Factbook, 2011).
place-based course on environmental stewardship or skills like camp cooking or mountaineering (Stott & Hall, 2003; Ward & Yoshino, 2007). This study certainly is in agreement with research connecting a change in one’s behaviors, self-awareness and interactions with the natural world (Lugg, 2007; Rickinson et al., 2004). Moreover, the development of basic outdoor skills and living close to the land for an extended period of time did influence participants’ interactions with the outdoors throughout their lives post-NELP, which was evidently a conduit to increasing their independence with this type of relationship with the world. However, unlike in research such as that of Stott and Hall (2003) that shows a demonstrable acquisition of technical skills shortly following a wilderness expedition course, higher-level outdoor technical skills such as orienteering were not necessarily maintained in the years since NELP. This diminishment of such a skill does not appear to have lessened their connection with the outdoors today, considering multiple participants responded that they may not have a high level of proficiency in orienteering, for example, but they still venture into the outdoors, nonetheless.

One aspect of a course so steeped in the environment was the reinforcement of how important the outdoors is to these participants throughout the duration of their lives. Interestingly, there seems to be a pattern in passing this perspective on to future generations, ranging from solidifying the importance for Alex in introducing his own future child to camping and the outdoors, or by Nancy and Richard’s children having an appreciation of the outdoors. This transference of a connection with the outdoors to
one’s offspring as a result of this type of experience is not an outcome that is oft
discussed in the literature.

**Increased self-confidence and self-knowledge.** While research on outdoor
programs at the postsecondary level has found improvement in aspiration and/or program
retention levels as a result of outdoor-based programs (for example, Davis-Berman, 1996;
Prussia & Weis, 2004), findings from this study did not confirm nor disconfirm this more
immediate effect on one’s educational accomplishments closely following this course.
This could also be a limitation of this study’s sample size and design, as the intentional
focus was not necessarily on that of the more immediate effects of this course. Yet, there
does seem to be a connection to a development of self-confidence and self-knowledge
and thus, a development of character strengths related to openness to new experiences
and persistence through challenges. We can see this exemplified through Richard’s
positive perspective of approaching challenges in his life or in Ella’s sense of resilience
towards approaching challenging experiences since the course.

This positive influence on one’s self-confidence and increased knowledge of self
is often reflected in literature connected to wilderness courses (e.g., Bennion & Olsen,
2002; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Kellert, 1998). Further, the time for reflection
during this course often confirmed or reinforced participants’ knowledge about their
selves and the world, spiritual leanings or perspectives which have carried on in the years
since for most participants (Heintzman, 2003). This part of spirituality—the
development of a sense of how the universe works and one’s place in it—is much like the
realization that Johnson and Fredrickson (2000) discuss of their wilderness ethics course
students’ recognition of the sublime wilderness that can be so much greater and more permanent than us. There is an impression that most participants’ sense of spirituality that was connected to the natural world was either reinforced or further developed in connection to time for reflection and the intimacy involved with living so closely to the land (Kellert, 1998).

Interestingly, Nancy and Ella, the two females interviewed for this study, specifically referenced that this experience occurred at a crucial time of transition to adulthood. This could be due to multiple reasons. In Neill’s (1997) assessment of the literature analyzing gender differences in relation to outdoor education, he found that, “outdoor education mostly achieves similar change scores for males and females (19 outcomes) or larger change scores for females (17 outcomes), but rarely achieves larger change scores for males (3 outcomes)” (p. 4). Neill further discusses that this, “…may surprise some people and appears to challenge the popular myth that outdoor education is largely conducted to suit males and does not address the needs of females” (p. 6). Ella and Nancy’s specificity in their understanding of self and this course could also be due to the fact that they may have been more cognizant of or in touch with their emotional perspectives at the time, or they may have been comfortable expressing this realization with me, as I am also a woman.

**Nurtured creativity.** Perhaps what makes this study most unique is that it not only looked at the long-term implications of a college-level outdoor-based course (as there are a number of studies on the impact of first-year wilderness orientations, for instance), but it evaluated the lifelong effects of an academic place-based English course
(and there is significantly less research on academic courses that are steeped in the outdoors). The interesting theme that emerged in this study is the long-term imprint of the nurturing of one’s creativity during this program.

Indeed, as an English course there is the inherent expectation that through close reading and deeply discussing literature, one’s skills of analysis and synthesis would be honed (and NELP course documents do verify this as an expectation). While participants alluded to the fact that they did have to examine and make connections between concepts during the program, the overall longstanding value appeared to be in the encouragement of experimentation and development of one’s creativity in cognitive and writing skills in particular. These are connected to the development of analysis and synthesis skills, as these aspects are part of the creative process. For instance, we can look at analysis as the building understanding of what is already known through examination and reflection, while synthesis builds on previously known concepts, either rearranging previous findings or creating new concepts or ideas from previous knowledge. Creativity can be seen as the balance of analysis and synthesis (Boden, 1995).

In addition, it appears that there is also at play what Maslow (1958) dubs as a self-actualizing creativity. This is reliant on qualities of character such as boldness, integration and self-acceptance, which make possible the generalized creativity, “…which expresses itself in the creative life, the creative attitude, or the creative person” (Maslow, 1958, p. 117). Maslow explains that in a peak experience one becomes more open to experience and more fully functioning, which are essential characteristics of self-actualizing creativity. When we consider NELP as a key educational experience, one that
is based on the theoretical foundation of peak experiences and involves academic challenge, self-discovery and a long-term application of lessons learned from such an experience (Yair, 2008), then it would make sense that this is a type of creative perception and expression that this course could nurture and develop.

For Richard and Alex they described a marked development of expression in their writing, a far cry from the technical requirements of other courses during their education. In particular, they related this as beneficial in its application to their careers. Not only was Ella’s writing opened to follow more creative channels, but she developed an openness to look beyond a formulaic right answer she felt was often demanded in more traditional classes. If we look at current literature on education, there is a renewed interest in developing innovators in today’s global knowledge economy (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Shaheen, 2010), which is connected to a need to veer from the one-right-answer mentality to a creative information processing pathway.

Discussion on essential pieces of an academic program that develop innovators includes a focus on collaboration, multidisciplinary learning, creation and experimentation (Wagner, 2012). NELP is a program that includes all of these components, whether through exploring one’s creative expression through writing or other art forms, through its cooperative community or combination of discourse on literature, philosophy, self-reflection and outdoor skills, among other subjects. Perhaps the value in such a program is even greater now, than ever before, especially in light of the distractions often posed by technology and our increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Especially through the course’s significant reliance on recording everything in a journal,
it is found that the generally recognized benefits of journals in experiential education are that of extensive reflection, using observation to conceptualize or theorize, which then helps solve problems, as well as develop creative skills (Dyment & O’Connell, 2003). Further, it has been found that journal writing helps students to,

…experiment with writing, to experience, perhaps for the first time, writing that may be highly personal, relatively unstructured, uninhibited, tentative, in process, in flux. (Anderson, 1993, p. 305)

This space for personal experimentation outside more typically structured assignments appears to have left long-lasting impressions on participants. The participants’ recognition of how much this has benefited them in creativity related to writing and cognition far beyond college is testament to the value of having the opportunity for and encouragement of unbridled exploration.

**Participant characteristics.** In assessing whether there are certain participant characteristics or experiences that contributed to the program’s impacts or lack thereof, there are certain qualities that do contribute to the affect on the participant. These can be categorized by having the interest to deeply engage with this type of program, as well as an openness to new experiences, relationships and self-reflection. This does not necessarily mean the characteristics of risk-taking, social intelligence or reflection are fully actualized when one enters the program; rather this references a receptivity at any level of consciousness to exploring these concepts.

First, there should be an interest in pursuing a course in which one will be living in a rustic communal setting removed from one’s typical daily lifestyle on campus while immersed in exploring literary and writing objectives. This is not to say that one would
be comfortable in such a setting or with such activities. Without an interest or curiosity for such a life experience, there would probably be little personal investment made by the participant during the experience. While this is a course that integrates outdoor experiences, this study’s participants demonstrate that it is not necessary to have an expertise in outdoor skills in order to be impacted by this course. When we consider these participants, while they began with an interest in or appreciation for being outdoors, they did not have more advanced knowledge of preparing for a hiking trip, orienteering or the like. Thus, one enters with an interest in these concepts and not necessarily an expertise.

Furthermore, a receptivity to new experiences and challenges is also important. As Ella expressed, “Everyone needs to be on board” to the unique design and demands of the program. She further explained that a participant must participate in the challenge of deep exploration and analysis of literature, poetry, philosophies and self to receive the most benefits from NELP. The ability to buy-in to the sort of educational experiment that exists in NELP each spring through its re-creation of an intimate living and learning community in New England is important. In essence, this receptivity to accepting a different state of social norms, the challenge of climbing a peak or living in a cabin without electricity is not only what gives the individual participant fodder for reflection and future experiences, but it contributes to the operating system of NELP, since the program is dependent on students accepting and actively participating in that which NELP offers.
In addition, former NELPers and current faculty also found it necessary for students to being open to making connections with others often through ways of social collaboration and class discussion. Indeed, in a closed community, there are various daily responsibilities each member of the group bears in cooking, cleaning and preparing for outdoor trips, which is an inter-reliance upon one another to which participants often refer.

In further discussing this quality with the current NELP director (A. Knuth, personal communication, May 13, 2012), this does not necessarily mean that one enters this course with a fully developed competency in such interactions. The first week of NELP looks and feels quite different to the final week of NELP, as students further hone and develop such capabilities of collaborating in different ways, bearing responsibility for chores or classes, or in other words, being able to develop a sense of what responsible citizenship means at NELP.

This is also related to the program’s search for students, “…who seem mature enough to conduct themselves with openness” (A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012)—an openness beyond just the emotional, to one that is the willingness to intellectually explore texts, writing, philosophies and ideas with others. Both Christensen and Knuth agree that an intellectual curiosity is what drives both individual and community growth (N. Christensen, personal communication, May 12, 2012; A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012). We can also connect this to the willingness to explore one’s self internally to which each participant refers. This interest in exploring one’s own perceptions and experiences through both journaling and discussion is a part
of the growth process, especially when journaling assists in the process of working through ideas and problems (Dyment & O’Connell, 2003).

**The openness tension.** Earlier in this chapter, in reflecting upon the lifelong significance of this program, especially in terms of character strength development, this study reveals that students leave NELP with an increased open-mindedness that is connected to themes including those of interacting with others, embarking on new experiences, and engaging in deeper intellectual and personal exploration. Thus we arrive at a potential tension—while NELP participants reap long-term benefits in being more open-minded in many ways (e.g., open to new challenges and experiences, to meeting new people), it can be seen here that it is helpful for one to enter this very program with a degree of openness towards exploring these very same or similar concepts. While all participants and interviewed NELP faculty concur with this pathway, there is surely an impact on this strength from this course, as seen through participants’ reflections and life experiences, and faculty reflection on the arc of the course dynamics.

However, this does pose further questions and areas of exploration. What is the level of impact, if any, on someone who does not enter with an adequate degree of openness? When one is not open or receptive in the aforementioned ways, how does one develop such an open-mindedness to begin with? In part, while studies show that education overall can help develop open-mindedness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), further research is needed to better understand how this strength is nurtured and sustained (Barron, Badjio & Gaskins, 1985).
Thus, there is likely more to learn about those who may or may not be successful or interested in such a course. Researchers studying character development at the postsecondary level using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) contend that it would be additionally helpful to conduct systematic assessment to identify students who do not participate in activities or programs that contribute to character development to better understand why this is so (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). It is also important to note that, “…values that promote open-mindedness might be acquired like other values, partly from school, partly from home, and partly from other media of acculturation” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 157), and that more research is needed to understand such connections.

**Program components.** When assessing the most integral components of this course, three major themes emerged: the collaborative and insulated nature of the NELP living and learning community, the process-oriented nature of the course overall and the significance of being steeped in place. Through analysis of the data, it appears that these qualities are rather interconnected.

**Collaborative community.** Current literature does examine and confirm the significance of a small, closed community often inherent to an outdoor experiential course, and how this community aspect necessitates the development of strong relationships and interpersonal skills, in particular (Fears & Denke, 2001; Miller, 2001; Sibthorp, 2003). This study would confirm the importance of a closed community for like reasons, developing participants’ character strengths of citizenship, social intelligence and even open-mindedness. An inherent piece of living in the woods, so to
speak, is also the removal of superficial bounds of appearance, an aspect to which participants often speak of when discussing an impact on an appreciation of beauty, in particular.

**Oriented towards process.** The process of developing certain skills, sharing multiple experiences, and the development of deeper relationships, which are both personal and intellectual in this academic and residential setting, is a part of the experiential process-orientation of this course.

There is a seamlessness between living and learning, which Alex explains as, “You were living your work, living your studies, living your classes…The learning in class was all day long, whereas when you’re on campus there’s much more of a dividing line between when you go to class and got other stuff going on.” Or in Ella’s reflection that, “…you don’t learn until someone tells you outside of any class that literature is not just to be studied it’s to be lived and it’s philosophy and it should be part of life, and can be part of life and that’s what NELP is. So those books are much more *internalized.*” Long-timer NELP educator Rachel Cohen expresses this deeply rooted aspect of NELP in that it demonstrates how, “…learning takes place everywhere and forever, it isn’t just confined to certain times and spaces in your life” (personal communication, May 13, 2012). Thus, it appears that the crux of the process-based nature of this course is strongly rooted to its academic principles, as well. Participants found this academic course wildly different from any other class—not only because it was a term in the woods of New England—but because of difference in intellectual demands.
Reading texts, writing and reflecting, and scholarly dialogue were a focus throughout the program, yet the benefit was seen in and of these actions and not necessarily focused on essays, exams or final grades. There is literature on grades diminishing student interest in what they are learning, as well as influencing a predilection for the easiest path possible towards the overriding focus of a grade (Kohn, 2011; Young, 2010). Perhaps this is connected to the shift in focus on the present experience that this course provides, which links to the development of internally motivated learners and the nurturing of the characteristic of a love of learning.

**Place-based education.** Perhaps this process orientation steeped in place is also succinctly explained as a, “…collapse of the real world:school world false dichotomy” (Roberts, 2007, p. 225). The seamless construct of living and learning as one and the same is also rooted in living and learning in the outdoors and a specific region. Returning to Baker’s (2005) Landfull Framework delineating essential points of meaningful place-based education, it is apparent that participants’ experiences reflect many of the key elements of this framework. The elements outlined by this framework include, (a) being deeply aware (increased awareness of one’s surroundings), (b) interpreting land history (increased knowledge of the uniqueness of a particular landscape), (c) sensing place in the present (facilitating connections to a place that are personalized and ever-evolving), and (d) connecting to home (promote the linking of landscapes—the transference from the backcountry to one’s front country home).

The place-based component of this course not only intellectualizes literature and philosophies often presented within, but also personalizes the readings and reflections to
one’s experience in the moment, as well as connecting philosophies to their lives beyond the course (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2000). Participants reflected on it being one type of experience to read Frost or Thoreau in a classroom, whereas it is quite another degree of impact to read their texts and learn about such figures’ lives in that very setting. This can also exemplify the power of the mind-body connection, presenting the opportunity to make present day and personally experienced interpretations and connections to the land and to ideas.

Further, through being connected to the land, whether through rustic living or a camping excursion, there is a dramatic shift from the nature of a college student’s lifestyle on-campus. Not only is the experience at NELP of being, “…so without your usual way of doing things” (Ella) and the potential discomfort and enlightened engagement with the literature, the community and the land often discussed by participants, but it is a part of the pedagogy of disorientation to which Christensen (2009) refers. Through experiencing such a different way of living at NELP, students often must adapt and reconsider their usual way of life (Christensen, 2009), which reflects an aspect of landfull education through the transference of learning from the NELP landscape and lifestyle to one’s home landscape and lifestyle (Baker, 2005).

Furthermore, technology often intercepts our close interactions with land (Baker, 2005; Carlson, 2002), as well as between one another. The impact of this fundamental piece of connecting with the natural world is reflected in participants’ experiences and memories of specific events when connecting to the terrain, and how this program reconfirmed the personal importance in interacting with the natural world throughout
their lives. Literature confirms the frequent development of ecological and social values and connections after experiencing outdoor-based programs (Bennion & Olsen, 2002; Lugg, 2007; Rickinson et al., 2004).

Another connection between this program being tied so closely to the land is its relationship with creativity. Haines (1996), a nature writer and educator, found that, “…the creative process originated in a close relation to and observation of nature and its processes” (p. 161), and that through paying closer attention to the world do we notice the patterns and aesthetic thereof that inspire our own creations. With emerging research also demonstrating that, “Literally thinking outside…may help eliminate unconscious mental barriers that restrict creative cognition” (Leung, Kim, Polman, Ong & Qiu, 2011, p. 15), this is particularly interesting to consider in relation to how living and learning very closely to the natural world is of impact.

Implications

Although the essential research question for this study was to look at the long-term impact of the New England Literature Program on participants, in conjunction with this greater understanding of program influence, one intent was to also contribute knowledge applicable to practice.

The results of this study suggest that due to the integral nature of developing a cooperative living and learning community, the vetting process of participants is important. As current director of this program, Aric Knuth discusses the application and interview process as a way to first screen anyone who seems unstable, but also to find students who have the maturity and intellectual openness to be a contributing member of
a close community (personal communication, May 12, 2012). Participant and NELP faculty reflections confirm the importance of this aspect of the community composition.

Through this study’s participant reflections, it is apparent that program design must be oriented towards the process of the experience, as opposed to a mere final grade. As Nancy expressed, she finally “got it” at one point during the course—that being present and sharing many types of common experiences with others was part of the process and impact of the program. It may be helpful to engage participants in an understanding of this process orientation throughout the program so as to be even more effective in exploring the value of sheer learning over the mere pursuit of a grade. This seamlessness between life and learning is quite powerful, especially when the vast majority of participants have been raised most of their lives in education divided by subject and hour and focused towards a letter at the end of the term.

An additional point of interest for practice is in the impact of today’s lifestyle that is increasingly integrated and intertwined with technology on the design of this course that is far removed from the latest technologies. Indeed, there is great value in current advancements in technology and our increased access to information and experiences. Yet, through separate discussions with veteran NELP faculty (N. Christensen, personal communication, May 12, 2012; R. Cohen, personal communication, May 13, 2012; A. Knuth, personal communication, May 12, 2012), each perceived a noticeable shift within the past five years in students’ attention spans and abilities to read long texts as compared to NELP students from earlier years. While this information is anecdotal in nature, it brings up the question of what is the impact of how a person’s use of a computer, for
instance, which often provides instantly gratifying fragments of information, affects his or her skills to work within a course like NELP. While research is currently being conducted to investigate the neuroplasticity of the brain and the affect the internet has on qualities like attention span, social competencies, academic performance and the like (e.g., the research of Gary Small or Susan Greenfield), a course like NELP that is an academic collaborative outdoor-based program may play an important role in addressing potential impacts of current and future lifestyles so deeply entrenched in technology.

This type of course is indeed impactful, as it further affects participant experiences and perspectives beyond the course. Moreover, it lends insight to, “…academics and learning, what it can be” (Alex), and can potentially open students to being more creative, less “right answer”-driven in other courses. This nurturing of one’s creativity through experience and experimentation is quite relevant to education today so that we can, indeed, contribute to a progressive, functioning society—especially in a world that,

…increasingly will be divided between high-imagination-enabling countries, which encourage and enable the imagination and extras of their people, and low-imagination-enabling countries, which suppress or simply fail to develop their peoples’ creative capacities and abilities to spark new ideas, start up new industries, and nurture their own “extra.” (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011, p. 138)

As a professor at Albion College throughout the rest of the academic year, Christensen explains that students in his courses on campus inherently feel a difference between his class and the rest of their classes. He attributes this to his integrating of “NELPish” components, in particular, through the way he crafts journal prompts and through taking his classes outside regularly, perhaps even
more so when the weather causes a physical discomfort. This raises a proposition in consciously integrating components of NELP into the on-campus classroom as one way to create an emotionally and intellectually compelling course. The development of many types of skill sets and pedagogical tools furthers our effectiveness as educators, and NELP demonstrates the value in integrating aspects like that of a process or place-based orientation into education.

The caveat here is that NELP specifically is not an “easy” program to direct, instruct or participate in due to the residential duration of the course, which is an important element as to how this course is run. For this type of experience, one must take time out from life in our mainstream society, and this is not always feasible due to job constraints, financial responsibilities and/or familial obligations. So, is it realistic to be involved with such a program or to establish more courses that are akin to NELP? It certainly is not for everyone. But for those who can take this time from their quotidian lives—both as educators and students—it is clearly worthwhile.

**Limitations**

As discussed in this study’s methodology chapter, wide-ranging generalizability is not necessarily a goal of this type of research, yet there is still the potential for a resonance with participant experiences for readers (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This approach through portraiture and small sample size led to a deeper focus on personal stories and perspectives that did allow for a more in-depth exploration of individual participants, a quality that often is linked with qualitative research. Yet, it is clear that this type of study is also limited by a small sample size and the demographics of its
participants—although they represent different generations and have diverse life experiences and lineages, they have similar categorical backgrounds as they all grew up in Michigan and are White, in heterosexual partnerships, leading middle class lifestyles.

Considering that one still retains his or her social identities when participating in this type of program, there are limitations to this sample. With a larger sample size, further isolating certain aspects such as a participant’s cultural and racial background, socio-economic status, gender and beyond when looking at the program’s impact may prove insightful and contribute to the literature in a different way. It would also be relevant to further examine facilitators’ identities and training to better understand their influences on participants and program design; however, this was not part of this study’s design.

**Future Research**

There are various directions one could take with regards to future research. One is related to participant and instructor identities. This study’s findings demonstrate that participants perceive significant diversity in their NELP experience, and such diversity appears to influence qualities such as open-mindedness towards others and collaborative skills they gain for the long-term, yet “on paper,” students appear demographically quite similar. It would be worthwhile to examine a larger more demographically diverse sample. It may also be informing to specifically explore certain aspects of participant identity in terms of this type of course’s impact, as well as compare perspectives of people who think this program is not for them and those who are attracted to this type of program.
Further exploration of this opportunity to technologically disconnect for a period of time is also an aspect to consider. For a course like NELP that is very much reliant on in-person interactions and discussion, tangible experience and reflection, and experimentation the specific impact on digital natives may be increasingly important to consider.

In addition, another question that arises is whether a basis in the natural world is necessary for a program to have similar outcomes. Would a similar program that is steeped in urban place garner like results?

Another interesting point for further research is the impact of such a program on a participant’s children. Most participants referenced either a passing on of (or a hope to do so in the case of an expectant parent) an appreciation for the outdoors to their children.

Furthermore, considering the way participants were affected by this course with regards to their sense of creativity, it would be interesting to further explore the nature of developing creative capacities through not only a course like NELP, but through other educational modalities at the postsecondary level in particular.

Summary

This study adds to the body of research on the significance of outdoor-based education at the postsecondary level by depicting the lifelong influence on participants. Although residential place-based literature courses like the New England Literature Program are not often offered as college academic courses, it is evident that they have a meaningful place in education. Through connecting with former NELPers years and even decades later, it is clear that the course’s long-term effects have been profound key
educational experiences for most participants, especially when participants frequently remark that this was the most important part of their college experience, as well as one of the most unique courses they had completed. With such emphatic reflections, it would behoove us to take notice.

This is a type of education that not only develops skills such as outdoor-related and more traditional academic cognitive skills. But, there are also many character strengths that are fostered, such as openness, receptiveness to challenges and social intelligence—which are, essentially, qualities that enrich our lives. Even large technological corporations are aware of the importance of developing such core values, and that social values and emotional skills are just as important as technical skills and offer workshops in such regards (e.g., Kelly, 2012).

Also relevant is the development of an appreciation of the outdoors that will be passed on to future generations, as this research shows how the influence of outdoor experiences for parents is transferred to their offspring. In a world that is heavily reliant on finite natural resources, having a connection to the natural world can potentially influence behaviors related to consumption or, in the least, connect people to something larger than themselves. Additionally, this program has inspired a long lasting effect on participants’ sense of creativity, thus making a contribution to the demand for innovators in our society. Many of us live frenetic lifestyles with many obligations, and developing a relationship with the natural world can lessen the distractions that often limit us from deeply connecting with ourselves, others and the world around us. The development of stronger collaborative skills, greater knowledge of one’s self and a connection with one’s
creative abilities can be helpful in negotiating many areas of one’s life. Unbeknownst to Walter Clark and Alan Howes, this type of course is perhaps even more important today and for future NELPers than for what it was in 1975.
References


higher education: Creative diversity in outdoor studies courses in higher education in the UK. Penrith: Institute for Outdoor Learning.


140


the country. Education Resources Information Clearinghouse Reproduction Service Number ED 357941.


Stott, T. and Hall, N. (2003). Changes in aspects of students’ self-reported personal,
social and technical skills during a six-week wilderness expedition in Arctic Greenland. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 3*(2), 159-169.


Appendix A: Individual Interview Recruitment Email

Dear NELP Alumna,

You have been referred to me as a person who can provide useful information regarding the lifelong impacts of the New England Literature Program. I am hoping that you are interested and willing to discuss your experiences.

My name is Lauren Victor and I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Denver. As an undergraduate, I, too, was a student at NELP. Now I am working on a dissertation that focuses on NELP and how the course has impacted your life choices, experiences and philosophies. Through this research I hope we can contribute to the body of knowledge on academic outdoor experiential college courses, the value they contribute to the university landscape and significant components of such a course that can support the quality of other programs.

Would you be willing to meet me for an interview? The interview will last for approximately 60 minutes and can be conducted in a location convenient for you. I would also greatly appreciate access to your NELP journals, or a selection of entries that you would be open to sharing with me, as they will contribute significantly to the study.

I appreciate your consideration in helping me move forward with my research, as I know that your time is valuable. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Lauren Victor
PhD Candidate
Higher Education Program
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
248.505.9330
### Appendix B: Participant Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the year you attended NELP?</td>
<td>Demographic information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your age at the time?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what point in your undergraduate education did you participate in NELP?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your undergraduate major?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you continue your formal education following college? If so, what did you do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your current occupation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about why you decided to participate in NELP and what attracted you to the program.</td>
<td>General; could potentially relate to skill development or character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you share an influential or pivotal moment from NELP? How did it affect you?</td>
<td>General; could potentially relate to skill development or character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being that this is an English course, how did it impact your writing skills? What types of writing skills were developed/demanded of you for this course?</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development: writing skills, analysis, synthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was this influence, or lack thereof, different from your experience with other academic English courses in college?</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development: writing skills, analysis, synthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did your outdoor-related experiences (i.e., summer camp, family hiking trips) look like prior to NELP? Did you find this course to add to your outdoor-related skills or knowledge? Could you share an example of a particular experience that reflected this? Did this experience impact how you interact with the outdoors now?</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development: outdoor skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has NELP affected your perspectives towards education or educational choices and aspirations, if at all?</td>
<td>Character strength development: open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you find your perspective impacted with regards to the larger picture of your life and what you wanted out of life? If so, how?...Has this new perspective carried throughout your life?</td>
<td>Character strength development: perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Character strength development:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you respond to goals that have a number of hurdles to get over?</td>
<td>persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your experience at NELP influence this and if so, how?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did the residential setting at NELP impact your relationships with</td>
<td>social intelligence, citizenship,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other students/staff?</td>
<td>self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you learn anything from these relationships in this community</td>
<td>Social intelligence, citizenship,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>setting that you still apply in relationships today?</td>
<td>self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has NELP influenced your consideration of beauty or aesthetics?</td>
<td>appreciation of beauty and excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think this experience influenced your spirituality or related</td>
<td>spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beliefs? Has this evolved since then or because of NELP?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was NELP’s impact different than that of the rest of your college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience? How so?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think the necessary conditions are for this type of program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to positively impact a participant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research has shown that the way you perceive the past is related to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how you feel now. Could you reflect on this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you would like to add that I haven’t asked?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C: NELP Director/Staff Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been involved with NELP/in what capacities?</td>
<td>Demographic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about what you consider are some strengths of the program?</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is NELP falling short?</td>
<td>Character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sources/philosophies have influenced NELP? (e.g., Dewey, Freire)</td>
<td>Course components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the primary learning objectives/intentions guiding NELP? What sorts of</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities are provided to achieve these intentions?</td>
<td>Character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course components</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does NELP impact students?</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do people participate in NELP?</td>
<td>Participant characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has the program changed over the years and why?</td>
<td>Course components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the years you have been involved with the program, do you perceive any shifts</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in how NELP impacts students (for example, is there a greater impact in being</td>
<td>Character strength development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separated from today's technology)?</td>
<td>Participant characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the greater U-M administration/English dept/community perceive NELP?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has this remained consistent or changed over the years?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has NELP affected your philosophy of education? How does it impact how you</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge development and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teach in the classroom?</td>
<td>Character strength development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
You are invited to participate in this dissertation research. The goal of the study is to understand one’s experience with the New England Literature Program. This study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of the doctoral dissertation research conducted by Lauren Victor. Your participation is completely voluntary, but it is very important. If you have any questions at all about this study, Lauren Victor can be reached at 248-505-9330 or Laur.vic@gmail.com. This project is supervised by Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher (Bruce.Uhrmacher@du.edu, 303-871-2483) in the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver.

As researcher, I will conduct interviews. They will be tape-recorded while I take notes. You may choose not to participate in the study and are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation involves no penalty.

As the researcher, I will, however, treat all information gathered for this study as confidential. This means that your responses will be identified by pseudonym only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses.

There are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. Any information you reveal concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect is required by law to be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

The benefits of being involved in this study include being able to discuss one’s experience to better understand the benefits of outdoor experiential education at the postsecondary level. Your participation will also provide me with invaluable data for my dissertation research. You may also enjoy the ability to provide information about your own experiences. If you would like a copy of the results of the study, I will be happy to provide one for you. Potential risks of being involved include the possibility that discussing certain issues about your experience may be upsetting. If this occurs, I will arrange for supportive care from an appropriate professional in your area.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions please contact: Dr. Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, University of Denver, 303-871-4531, or the Office of Sponsored Programs at du-irb@du.edu or 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver CO 80208-2121. Thank you again.
“I have read and understand the above description of this dissertation research. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation for any language I did not fully understand. I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about my participation. I agree to participate in the study, and I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.” (Please sign below.)

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign below if you understand and agree to participate.
“I have read and understand the above description of this dissertation research I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation for any language I did not fully understand. I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about my participation. I agree to participate in the study, and I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.” (Please sign below.)

☐ I agree to be audiotaped.
☐ I do not agree to be audiotaped.

________________________________________  ________________________
Signature                                      Date

________________________________________
Print Name

☐ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following email or postal address:
Appendix E: Protocol for Review of Documents

Questions to consider during document review

1. What do examples of or changes in skill and knowledge development or character strengths development look like, per the skill/knowledge and character strength development framework qualities?

2. What components of this course are primarily discussed?
Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Questions to consider during interviews and on-site observation:

Interviews

1. What is the location of the space in which I am interviewing someone? In particular, if it is their home or a familiar place, how does it reflect them?
2. What is my initial impression of how the individual engages with the world around him or her?
3. What nonverbal cues are communicated throughout the interview?
4. How does the participant react emotionally to different topics?

On-site at NELP

1. What is the space like in which I am conducting observations? How does it impact the people here?
2. How does this location relate to others experienced at NELP? Is it a commonly trod place, is it central, is it isolated, is it relevant to the discussion?
3. During classes, how does the instructor engage students? What skills or traits does he or she demand of students (see skill/knowledge and character strength frameworks to help define these qualities)? To what extent do all of the participants engage in discussion?
4. Is there a difference in the interactions that occur in different spaces at NELP (i.e., in the dining hall or library, by the lake, on a hike)?
5. What is the overall ambiance of the NELP community?
Appendix G: NELP Common Writing Prompt Example

[Read from beginning of Chapter XII (A Strange Sail) through “…dreads the thought of being rescued.”]

In some important ways, the person behind these lines is in a situation that’s a lot like ours: she’s a tourist in a foreign place—and, possibly like some of us, she’s a little skeptical of the other tourists who might disrupt her experience of that place. And maybe more important: as a tourist she’s oddly situated between one version of what surrounds her—the quaint, small-town simplicity of Dunnet’s Landing—and the other version that’s more about the wild, dramatic islandness of where she is. The narrator has quaintness on one side of her and wildness on the other, and the result is something she finds incredibly appealing.

As you move around the island today, odds are good that you’ll come into contact with both the quaint and the wild at one point or another. But before we leave for the day, take ten minutes to start building some of your own thoughts about islands. It may or may not really feel apparent to you right now as you stand here and listen to this, but you, too, are on an island. We had to leave something to get here; we are in a different place. How do islands live in your mind? How does your mind feel like it might be shaped by the island?

Take ten minutes right now, where you are, to respond to these questions in your journal. If you don’t feel particularly islanded right now take a couple of minutes to check in with that fact, with your surroundings. Maybe let the island, and your being on it, sink in just a little more before writing.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Association for Experiential Education (AEE)—As stated on their website (www.aee.org), “The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) a nonprofit, professional membership association dedicated to experiential education and the students, educators and practitioners who utilize its philosophy. A wide variety of members make up our association including ropes course operators; school, college, and university staff and faculty; therapists; outdoor education practitioners; organizational development specialists; experience-based professionals working in the nonprofit, private, and academic space; and members of many other areas of experiential education.”

Counter-narrative—Perspectives that tend to be marginalized and less reported, publicized or taught.

Eco-progressivism—A term first published in Carlson (2002), but further discussed in Roberts’ (2007) work. An educational philosophy/approach that forces us to question the purposes of and the way in which we organize schooling and value knowledge, introduces people to counter-narratives and counter-technologies (essentially, alternatives to how education is conceptualized and how we view and participate in the world) and views knowledge as integrated, contextual and experiential.

Experiential education—Educational practices that involve direct concrete experience(s) for learners, accompanied by supported reflection that promotes their analysis and understanding of the experience(s). This knowledge can then be applied to future experiences.
Outdoor education—Generally involves programming that takes place in the outdoors with content that focuses on the outdoors and develops a better understanding of the nature-human relationship.

Outdoor experiential education—Provides students with direct experience with the natural world, in such a way that nurtures personal reflection on firsthand experiences, and an increased awareness and understanding of connections between the self and one’s surroundings of the past, present and future.

Place-based education—An approach that draws on the local community and environment to teach a wide range of content. For example, this can include learning about local history, culture, economics and the environment, while connecting students to the community surrounding them, which often improves student connections to the community, natural world and their sense of responsibility towards both.