

Immersion students return

21 days of adventure and rerouting

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Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education (WLEE) is a department that trains students to become successes in the outdoor industry. Immersion is a semester where WLEE students apply the skills they have learned and become facilitators. This semester's Immersion team just finished the 21-day excursion prior to Thanksgiving Break.

Each semester in the WLEE department there is usually an Immersion group, but not all the routes taken are the same. The semester is unique because eligible students apply to be part of the team. Group sizes are typically 10 students with one primary professor and one co-leader for the 21-day trip.

This semester, there are nine students and the team is led by WLEE professor John Buford. Each Immersion has a WLEE professor leading, with a rotation of Buford, Clyde Carter, Robert Dye and Jenny Kafsky. Students have relative free reign over their route for the 21-day trip, with limitations on van mileage and the skill level of the group overall.

The team this semester started at Mount Mitchell and backpacked for eight days to Linville Gorge. There, the team were rock climbing for three days, and then moved on to the NCOBS (North Carolina Outward Bound School).

"We got to do community service there for the last day there and then rappelled, which was pretty fun," Immersion member Jordan Haak said.

After staying at NCOBS, the team hiked another two days to Ginger Cave Creek, where the team was evacuated due to wildfire smoke. "We got picked up and got dropped off at John [Buford's] river property and paddled the French Broad starting at Section 0 [in Rosman]," said Haak.

From Rosman, the crew paddled a total of 56 miles in three days on the French Broad River. Once off the river, the group was transported to the intersection of the Blue Ridge Parkway and

the Art Loeb Trail and hiked three days back onto campus.

The weather was a large factor on the group, as the team was out during the peak of the drought and wildfires. The drought, which was classified as an extremely severe drought on the N.C. Drought Conditions Map, was causing all of the water sources in the backcountry to dry up.

"Initially we were supposed to hike to the South Fork of the New River when we were finished climbing, but we had to change that because there was no water," said Haak. "We were going to paddle the New River for eight days as our final stretch of the 21-day. That changed."

The team was reconfiguring the route plan up until the final week before they left. "The smoke gave us a lot of problems," said Haak, "And we had to carry water with us more than usual because we couldn't fill up in some places."

Haak was evacuated from the field for two days due to a knee injury. "During that time, the team really ran into a water problem," Haak said. "They had to hike two 12-mile days in a row to get to NCOBS when it was supposed to take three days because they didn't have enough

water to spend the night."

Three students came in and out of the field due to injury and sickness. In order to pass the 21-day, a student has to make it 15 days in the field. "Injuries are pretty easy and it isn't a big deal usually," Haak said, "I mean, you can get something like blisters on your feet and have to sit out for a day or two in order to heal. It's okay."

One of the primary goals of the Immersion semester is to teach students to consistently and carefully reflect on their work. Haak said the team wrote journals often, and took time for themselves in the woods. "You really grow close to everyone while you're out there," Haak said. "You're living with everyone and I spent 504 hours out in the woods, with the same people, cooking and living together. It's great and you make a lot of memories, but taking time for yourself is essential."

The next Immersion group is scheduled to go out in the spring semester, and will be led by WLEE professor Robert Dye. This semester's team has a couple more labs to finish before a final reflection period during exam week, including a day caving in Worley's Cave, TN.



Photo courtesy of Jill Kaulius

Immersion team hikes back onto campus after 21 days in the woods.