BAYLOR JOHNSON AND STEVE ALEXANDER

The St. Lawrence University Adirondack Semester

A SMALL GROUP of students walk quickly down a path layered with pine needles and buttered with afternoon sun. In the trees overhead the breeze sighs, and high above the canopy a bald eagle screeches. At the top of the hill, the students left their university van. At the bottom, they will find canoes and paddle across a lake to their small tent village among towering pines and hemlocks. From van to village takes perhaps twenty minutes, a mile of travel, and a big leap between worlds.

We have recreated the ideal sought by the founders of the first liberal arts colleges

The students are enrolled in St. Lawrence University's Adirondack Semester. For most of the fall term, they live in a cluster of yurts—large, round tents with wooden floors—on the edge between the wilderness of the Adirondack forest and the civilization they have half forsaken. Students live each day under a canopy of evergreens beside the lake, close enough to wilderness to see beavers swimming across the lake for an evening meal and to hear the hoot of owls and the lament of loons, but still close enough to the modern world to hear logging trucks rumbling down the road a mile or so away. They sleep three to a sixteen-foot yurt, and so with more room than many students on campus, but there are no closets, no stereos, no telephones, computers, or radios. Even their beds are sleeping bags on top of backpackers' air mattresses. Bathing is a sponge bath in the wood-fired sauna or a dip in the lake. Neither the simplicity of their lives nor the intimacy with wild nature is arbitrary or accidental. These are experiential extensions of an academic curriculum dealing with the natural world and environmental problems.

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The authors wish to thank those who offered comments on drafts of this paper, including Glenn Harris, Mary Hussman, Wil Rivers, Jennifer MacGregor, Marion Roach, and Gretchen de Grasse.

The curriculum

The yurt village is called Arcadia, a name suggesting the perfect balance between wilderness and civilization (Eisenberg 1999). This is an ideal on a teeterboard, always sought but never permanently attainable. Here students take a full load of academic courses taught by professors who commute from the main university campus. The courses are: Natural History of the Adirondacks; Land Use Change in the Adirondacks; Philosophy and the Environment; Creative Expressions of Nature; and Cultivating Place: Bioregionalism and Community Engagement.

The natural history course covers the geology of the glaciated landscape around Arcadia, and the flora, fauna, and ecology of the region. Most classes involve field trips, often exploring the immediate surroundings. Students must each identify roughly one species per day, noting where they observed it and in what conditions, describing it in detail, and using field guides to classify it. Later in the course, they use their reading to add general information about the species they have identified. On campus, this record keeping might seem tedious, but this is far less the case when the plants and animals are so obviously one's companions, and when the task of identification is so naturally shared with other students. Unsurprisingly, the task and the knowledge gained from it lead to greater awareness and

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curiosity about the natural world around the village.

Land use has been the key controversy in the Adirondack Mountains almost since the area's penetration by Europeans in the early nineteenth century. These mountains became a nursery for the idea of wilderness conservation. Conservation, however, soon came into conflict with rapacious logging practices. The ultimate result—still evolving—is the immense Adirondack Park (9,375 square miles, or about the size of Vermont) formed from a patchwork of public and private lands. Developers, local residents, recreationists, environmentalists, and others still fight ceaselessly over what will become of this wild landscape. In the land use course, students learn about these battles and their importance in environmental history, as well as the importance of land use both as a cause of and a solution to environmental problems.

Environmental damage is usually said to be a product of the size of human population, the level of consumption, and the technologies we use. The course on philosophy and the environment analyzes social causes and solutions to environmental problems, especially consumption. It presents a theory of happiness to explain how we can live well while consuming less and reducing our environmental footprint. The theory also explains why we find it so difficult to consume less. Though the course promotes voluntary simplicity, it also explores limits to individual reductions in consumption as well as the importance of public policy that steers everyone toward environmental protection.

All the courses require students to reflect on what they are learning. Creative Expressions of Nature provides an opportunity to do this in more a personal way. One assignment asks each student to write an environmental autobiography explaining how they came to their views and feelings about the natural world. Students also study the work of other writers and artists, such as sculptor Andrew Goldsworthy, and then use these models as inspiration for their own creations. The final paper asks them to explain what they have learned during the semester about how humans conceptualize and conduct themselves in relation to nature and place. (The present article ends with an excerpt from one of these papers.)

Cultivating Place explores the benefits of knowing one's local environment and consuming local products. This course is also the academic and administrative home for the Adirondack Practicum, a three-week culmination to the semester involving independent study, work with a local person or organization, and a home stay. The practicum is intended to encourage students to reflect on the lessons of the semester, synthesize the elements into a personal whole, and form a vision of how to transfer these elements into their future lives.

Numerous threads run between courses. All concern some combination of nature and our connection with it, environmental problems and solutions. Land use is a unit in the environmental philosophy course. Cultivating Place proposes solutions to environmental woes, as do the philosophy and land use courses. Ideas from any of the courses may show up in Creative Expressions. (For example, a student used Goldthread, a plant he identified for the natural history course, in his Goldsworthy project. To the uneducated eye, Goldthread is an undistinguished, ground-hugging carpet of small leaves. The student, however, had learned in the natural history course that just below the surface it has long, golden rhizomes providing striking colors and sinuous form for his sculpture.)

Outside the academic courses, students learn woodworking—making a canoe paddle and furniture—in noncredit workshops. They also begin the program with an extended wilderness camping trip and learn outdoor skills in frequent weekend outings. Together, these nonacademic activities provide the satisfactions of handwork, physical and creative activity, increased competence, and relief from the headwork of their academic classes. They are also often useful topics to connect to the credit-bearing courses.

An extraordinary learning community

Though the courses reinforce one another, experience itself unites the elements of the program. The most important part of that experience is living in a small, close-knit community with a materially simple lifestyle that is in close contact with nature.

The Adirondack Semester is necessarily a small program, with enrollment limited to twelve students. They cook for one another, split the firewood that keeps them warm, and clean and maintain the village. The intimacy of the small group, shared chores, service to

one another, adventure, fun, and intellectual exploration are together the foundation for an extraordinary living and learning community. Key also are the assistant directors, who live on-site (relieved for forty-eight hours each week by the director). They have the primary responsibility to foster mutual respect, open and honest communication, accountability, and mindfulness among the students. As a result, students frequently say that learning how to live harmoniously with others is among their most important outcomes.

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Life at Arcadia is materially simple by design. The fundamental source of all our environmental problems is material consumption, and a sustainable society must surely be one in which we satisfy our fundamental human needs—for food, drink, comforts, satisfying social relationships, and interesting activities—more directly and with fewer trinkets as intermediaries. The material simplicity of Arcadian life offers a chance both to practice and to test that premise. Personal electronics are limited to MP3 players. Accommodations in yurts are Spartan. A small trunk and a backpack full of clothes and gear is all most people bring.

To readers, this may sound painfully ascetic. Yet this is not the effect on the students. The richness of their social community, the stimulation provided by their learning, the sensuous pleasures of life in close touch with nature, and their growing awareness of the wildlife and natural processes around them more than make up for the absence of the things they lack. As one student, with the nodding agreement of all, told a visitor who raised the topic of boredom, "I'm never bored here, or if I am, I always know it is my own fault and I just have to go out and do something."

Nature is everywhere around them all the time. Any trip outside a yurt means passing under the canopy of old trees, feeling the weather, hearing the wind overhead or the chitter of a red squirrel. It is easy to forget the planet in urban or suburban settings, but at Arcadia, Gaia is ever-present—as the soft morning mist, as a staccato call of a woodpecker, as the moment to moment change of the face of the lake. This isn't nature in the abstract or the sublime nature that overpowers. This is an enveloping, ever-present, whispered reminder of the mystery of existence and of our co-occupation of the planet with other wondrous forms of life.

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During the Adirondack Semester, students form an extraordinary learning community. Since everyone has the same courses and the same assignments, conversation about them, formal study sessions, and one-on-one peer tutoring are quite natural. There are no bars to adjourn to, no blaring music to pull one aside, and no group outside one's intellectual community to escape to. The line between intellectual and social life is invisible, not because everyone studies all the time but because academic subject and the rest of life are so seamless.

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On campus, the least academically interested students often have disproportionate influence. At Arcadia, to a great degree, the dominant atmosphere is set by the most studious. In such a close community, everyone knows when the first person begins to read or write or study for some assignment. A tug of conscience pulls the next most studious person to work, and then the next, and so on until each one has begun his or her work.

We have recreated the ideal sought by the founders of the first liberal arts colleges: a small group of students with shared interests and serious purpose, living harmoniously and mostly free from the temptations and distractions of the larger world, learning from senior scholars at the same time that they tutor one another.

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One parent commented on the result, saying of his bright but hyperactive, procrastinating son, "I don't know what you've done, but I have never seen him so interested in his courses."

Limitations

The program has limitations. Since it must be small, we can reach only a few students. Only those who are interested apply, so arguably the program reaches only students already inclined to accept the lessons it teaches. As a result, radically dissenting voices are absent from classroom debate. The absence of computers, a laboratory, and access to more than a rudimentary library severely limits possibilities for individual research.

Further, while we say that the Adirondack Semester brings students close to nature, the atmosphere just described and the deep effects of the program are not achieved without artifice. This venture is inspired by programs abroad that immerse students in a foreign language and culture. Ours immerses students in nature. But whereas students living in a foreign culture cannot casually leave it, our immersion is artificial. Town is only ten miles away, and the university and friends only forty-five. While participants establish many of the rules for the community, some are set beforehand, in order to achieve the immersion, and are not negotiable. We permit no mind-altering substances stronger than caffeine, no electronic music audible to others, and no leaving the larger (3,000-acre) site except with the group. The group does leave. Every course takes at least one field trip, and the group goes to town fortnightly for a Laundromat, phone calls to friends and family, and a chance to use computers at the village library. No one, however, has a private car, and sneaking off to meet someone would be a major breach of the rules. The power of the program—the close social ties, devotion to learning, awareness of flora and fauna, processes, and cycles—depends on the isolation we create each time we leave our vehicles and travel the last mile by foot and open boat to Arcadia. The artificiality and the struggle to find the right balance between nature and civilization are no secret at Arcadia, but students willingly embrace them in order to experience the results.

For many of its participants, the program is transformative. One alumna, Louise Gava, who is now the university sustainability coordinator, told the *New York Times* that the program has affected every decision she has made since she left it, adding "what it's done for me is make me think about what I really need to make for a fulfilling life." Another student, Katie Powers, wrote the following in her final essay for Creative Expressions:

> I've thoroughly enjoyed my time in these woods, the weeks of growing closely tied to this small corner of the world and to my fellow students. I know that I've grown closer to nature, and that I've learned a great deal about the work that goes into creating a strong, cohesive community. But the understanding I worked hardest for, the understanding that is perhaps most important, is the knowledge that we must find a balance. It was difficult to go from a canoe to a car and from the forest to Tupper Lake, but it was through these contradictions that our purpose became clear. For me, this semester wasn't a quest for solitude; it wasn't a vacation. It was the first tangible answer, the groundwork for feasible, practical, imperative change. We won't solve environmental problems by hiding in cities, constructing walls of technology between our lives and the natural world. And we certainly won't solve them by hiding in the woods, ignoring the societies from which problems are born. I learned a valuable lesson this fall, one that I hope I can pass on to friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens: we must inhabit a place that is somewhere in between. We must know and cherish the nature that we care about and depend on, and we must also know society, economy, technology. Though we will at times feel clumsy, it is this balance of the woods and the world that promises a successful, sustainable future. □

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REFERENCE

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