Adventure Leadership Immersion Experience in Nature (A.L.I.E.N.)
Wingate University
Collaborative for the Common Good

Working with Brad Turley began by realizing that there was a real connection between the space, resources, people, and serving the community. The ALIEN program began as an experiment on how we could use the natural landscape to improve the lives of the people in its community. We landed on bringing in a diverse cross-section of college students from Wingate University to lead them through a transformative leadership experience away from technology, media, and traditional comforts to allow their natural sense of teamwork, communication, and leadership emerge. It was a space where they can immerse themselves in nature and then 'think' and 'do' -- together.

The ALIEN program is how Wingate University has partnered with Brad Turley of Southern Eighths Farm to provide a non-traditional laboratory of difference making for students. The conceptual framework comes from the need to bring students into nature to develop certain critical leadership character traits through engagement with and within the natural environment.

WHY NATURE?
- Physical and psychological health benefits
- Steep decline in engagement with nature due to increase in screen time and sedentary lifestyles among young adults
- Influencing a conservation/preservation mindset

WHY LEADERSHIP?
- Untaught in typical college curriculum
- Valuable life skill for virtually any career or life path
- Creates community leaders to spread positive character traits among the community

After conducting a prototype ALIEN one-day program in Fall 2019, 18 students in Dr. Harrist's Community and Commercial Recreation Programming course (CCR 212 Spring 2020) are developing possible ALIEN programming models as part of their learning outcomes for their class.

HOW?
- Identification of most desired competencies
- Conducting target-marking of Wingate Students
- Developing research-based targeted outcomes
- Analysis and operationalization of long-term goals

IDEAS TO DATE FROM STUDENTS:
- Wilderness Escape Room
- Leadership Training Course Site
- Biological Surveying

The PILOT

In the pilot program, seven students from Wingate University volunteered to participate in a leadership development course held entirely in nature at the Southern Eighths Farm in Chesterfield, SC. The farm, owned by Brad Turley, is approximately 1500 acres of untouched, undeveloped land. Historically, this land dates back to the early 1800's and was a critical position in the Civil War. Along with the seven students was Dr. Nick Delangie, Dr. Chris Harrist, Dr. Cathy Wright, Mr. Brad Turley, and Mr. David Harper. The students were briefed on the history of the property along with some of Mr. Turley's philosophies on leadership and nature.

The experience began with a hike across the property to an open field where the history of native american tribe life was evident from the arrowheads found scattered on the ground. From there, the group split up and only the students, Dr. DeLangie, and Mr. Harper continued on the program. DeLangie served as the adventure leadership guide while Harper served as the expert naturalist providing insight into local plant and animal species. The first objective was to use a satellite map of the property and practice observational cartography to plot a route. The students did this in groups of three and four. They used magnetic needle compasses and found their bearing between plotted points which were marked with orange marking tape. While on this hike, Harper identified plants which were edible, those that were poisonous, and those that were non-native species to the area.

"Having participated in summer camps during my youth, I never really thought about what went into planning them, until this class. I learned what goes into setting up a successful summer camp. I enjoyed learning about how to include everyone from all aspects of life regardless of their physical capabilities. I also enjoyed the ability to collaborate with people in the class that had different perspectives. It's interesting to see how ideas on paper can turn into reality."

Once the group reached a dense grouping of pine forest, they were given instructions on how to make a debris hut shelter. Their instructions were intentionally minimal to give the students room to experiment, make mistakes, and learn the best way to build a shelter which would

house their group for at least 24 hours. Each group was given just 30 minutes to complete the task. They divided jobs, assigned each other roles and accomplished the task in time.

After building the debris hut the students returned to the conference center to reflect on their tasks and experiences in a large group setting. Each student was asked to share their insights and reflect on the challenges they encountered in the tasks. The students then ate lunch and prepared for the afternoon session. Once lunch was complete the students took a pad of paper and drawing utensils out into the woods to be alone in nature. They were instructed to sit apart from one another and draw their surroundings in light of their feelings reflected from their time in nature that day. The students had 30 minutes to complete this task. Once they were finished, they brought their works back to the group and presented, one at a time, to the others. Their assignment was to describe their art work and how their reflections were represented. The others in the group were encouraged to ask questions and dive deeper into the reflection. The ensuing conversation was inspirational and insightful. Finally, the facilitators conducted a brief exit survey of the group to elicit feedback on what worked well, what did not work in the program, and what the participants would have changed.

The COURSE

Following the pilot event and as a result of mutual interest between the Collaborative for the Common Good and the Southern Eighths Farm to continue developing a transformative experience, a special topics course was designed by Drs. Harrist and DeLangie to provide students with an opportunity to develop a full outdoor immersion program designed to meet targeted outcomes. Students in the course self-selected into groups of three to four and were first tasked with understanding the target market of the ALIEN program. In so doing, the student-programmers researched their colleagues to better understand psychographic variables (e.g., needs, wants, desires) as well as the most desired competencies that are most deficient in college students. Through their efforts, the student-programmers discovered that most college students would prefer an experience that is, above all, enjoyable. More specifically, a program that effectively balanced challenge and skill (i.e., Theory of Flow) through immersive, engaging activities. Research also revealed four key ultimate outcomes: communication, creativity, collaboration, and leadership.

"I enjoyed the class and getting to work on an assignment that was actually going to be done instead of a fictional program."

With the ultimate outcomes set, the student-programmers then used logic modeling to deconstruct the competencies of communication, creativity, collaboration, and leadership into distal and proximal outcomes. Each group was then tasked with creating a three-day event that utilized outcome-based programming, combining intentionality with best practices in facilitation.

To help in their understanding of the project and get a first hand account of the property, the student-programmers were invited to visit the Southern Eighths Farm during class time. The class met briefly with Mr. Turley to understand his desires for the program, as a requirement of their class project was to consider all stakeholder groups and make certain their needs were met. Dr. DeLangie then led the class on a brief hike to introduce the student-programmers to the land and get a better understanding of the physical resources at their disposal. Through guided discussions and workshop sessions, each group developed a full, three-day experience for the student colleagues.
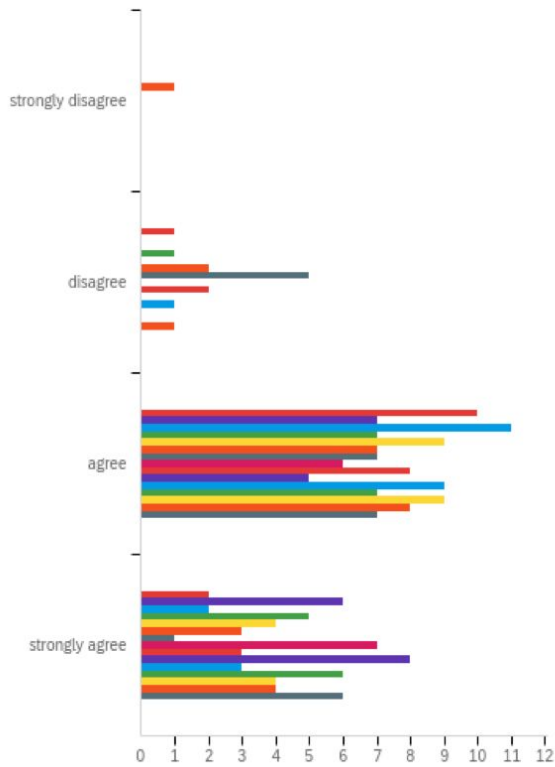
After project proposals were submitted, Drs. Harrist and DeLangie evaluated each program and selected what they felt were the best components of each. For the final phase of their semester-long project, the groups were assigned specific elements of the program plan to fully develop into our proposed protocol. Areas of responsibility included activity blocks, reflective readings, meal times, competency build-up events, arrival/dismissal, self-actualization sessions, and the culminating event.
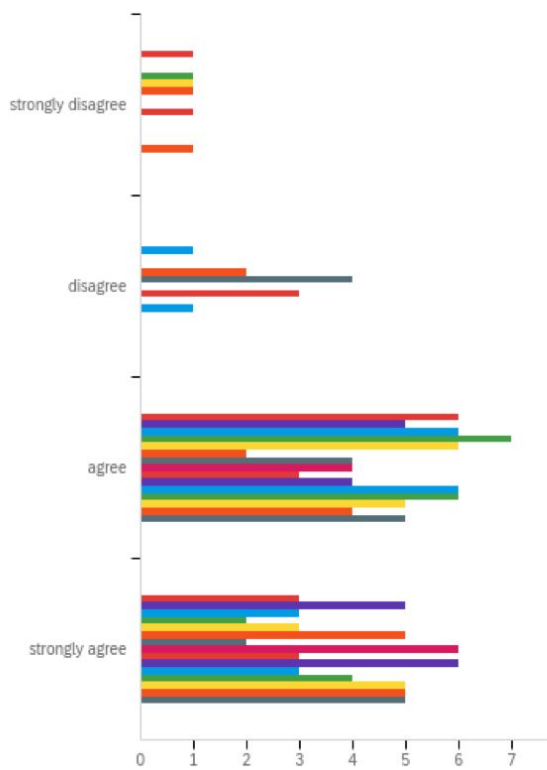
The DATA

Following are the data collected from the student-programmers regarding their experiences in the special topics course. Students were surveyed at the conclusion of the course and asked to reflect on their perceptions prior to taking the course and after completion. One of the goals of project-based learning is to help students connect with the material and provide opportunities to apply specific concepts to real-world applications. It is hoped that these experiences aid students in understanding the importance of their classroom interactions and help them take ownership of their education. An analysis of the data showed that students felt the schoolwork assigned was more meaningful and important after taking the course. Further, students reported that the things they learn in school will be important for their future and perceive school as being more worthwhile.

Data also revealed that students felt more competent as a result of taking the course. Specific areas of note include working as part of a team, finding ways to solve problems, coming up with new ideas, listening to differing points of view, researching an idea or issue, and taking on different roles and responsibilities. These findings mirror the goals set for this course. We desired to create a dynamic learning environment that helped students develop transferable skills. These targeted skills were gleaned from research that sought to explore the most desirable competencies of students entering the workforce. These are known as the 4Cs of 21st Century Skills - Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity.
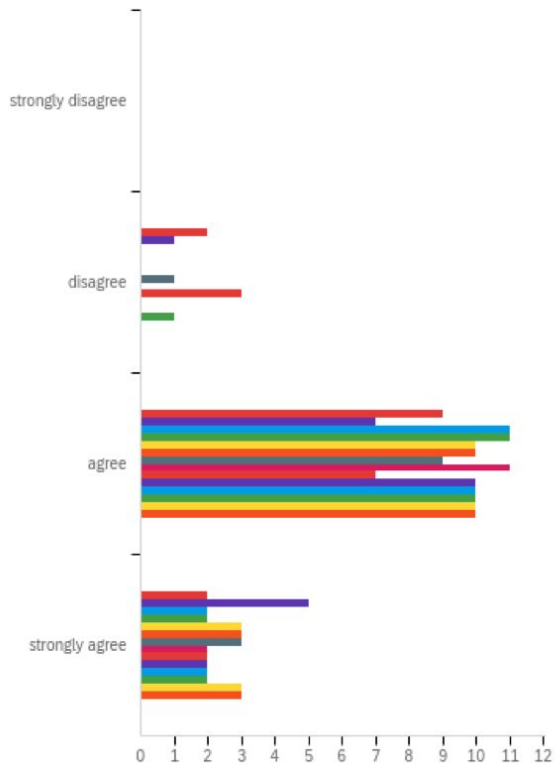
This course provided a unique opportunity for students to invest in themselves through investing in others. Through their work in developing an outcome-based outdoor recreation program, the students became active agents in their own development.
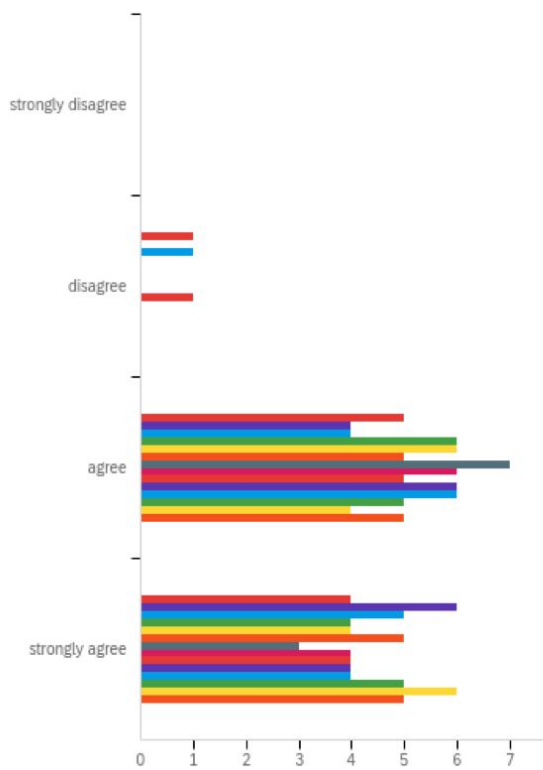
Legend (top chart):
- I like being at school
- I can get good grades when I try
- I am interested in the work at school
- I pay attention in class
- I am pretty smart in school
- Time seems to pass quickly when I am doing school work
- I like schoolwork best when it is challenging
- I can do well in school if I want to
- I feel that the schoolwork I am assigned is meaningful and important
- If I work hard, I can be successful in school
- My classes are interesting to me
- I can work very hard in school
- I think that the things I am learnings in school will be important for my f...
- I feel that school is worthwhile
- I am a good student

Legend (bottom chart):
- I like being at school
- I can get good grades when I try
- I am interested in the work at school
- I pay attention in class
- I am pretty smart in school
- Time seems to pass quickly when I am doing school work
- I like schoolwork best when it is challenging
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Legend:
- I am good at talking about my ideas in front of a group of people
- I am good at writing about my ideas
- I am good at working as part of a team
- I am good at finding ways to solve problems
- I am good at figuring out how to make a good decision
- I am good at coming up with new ideas
- I am good at being the leader of a group
- I am good at listening to other people's ideas even if they are different t...
- I am good at asking others to explain their ideas or points of view
- I am good at compromising with other people to reach a common goal
- I am good at researching an idea or issue
- I am good at summarizing information that I have researched
- I am good at taking on different roles and responsiblities
- I am good at using technology to gather information on an idea or issue

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The RESULT

We have developed a process-centered, outcomes-based program that has carefully considered its participants as well as its stakeholders and delivers an immersive and transformative experience. In addition, the student-programmers, as members of the course, have engaged in their own program. Through their completion of the semester long project, the student-programmers have engaged in communication, creativity, collaboration, and leadership. And similar to our desire for the participants of the ALIEN program, the class was unaware they were engaged in a carefully developed and intentionally targeted program. They were simply immersed and engaged in an enjoyable (at least we hope) experience designing a program that will provide benefits for a number of participants.