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Learning from the Land: Creating Authentic Experience-Based Learning that Fosters Sustained Civic Engagement

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Grand Canyon Semester (GCS) presents an excellent test case for exploring the success of Honors Semesters in meeting the goals articulated in this contribution to the NCHC Monograph Series: the transferability of skills and the interrelation of integrated learning, experiential education, and civic engagement. GCS began in 1978 as a partnership of Northern Arizona University (NAU), Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP), and the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) that would offer a place-based, experiential, immersive Honors Semester program. Students came from across the country to live onsite at Grand Canyon and NAU and to take interdisciplinary courses taught by NAU faculty, GCNP staff, and NCHC facilitators. From its start, GCS was organized around an applied core of courses that were team taught, featured integrated assignments, and used both classroom and field-based learning

in ways designed to break down disciplinary silos and to ground learning in authentic, real-world applications. GCS embodied many of the key pedagogical tenets of integrative learning identified by Carolyn Haynes: team teaching and planning, clustered courses, learning communities, interdisciplinary core seminars, inquiry- and discovery-based teaching, multicultural pedagogy, thematic focus, and collaborative learning projects.

Forty years on, GCS is now the longest-running semester program associated with NCHC, a persistence that no doubt owes a great deal to the immensity and complexity of the subject. Indeed, perhaps only an integrated approach can provide an authentic learning experience for an object of the magnitude and complexity of Grand Canyon. The central question posed by the present volume is whether the experiential, integrative learning practiced by GCS does lead to an increase in analytical skills, greater interest in and levels of civic engagement, and the desire for careers that make a difference. This essay begins by considering the distinct opportunities Grand Canyon offers for considering and practicing civic engagement. We then look at the changing landscape of integrative pedagogy in GCS. The essay concludes with discussion of a recent survey of GCS alumni that offers some qualitative assessment of the program's success in meeting the goals articulated by this volume.

GRAND CANYON AND THE *CIVIS*

In a discussion of Honors Semester programs, Bernice Braid emphasizes both the structural similarities of such programs and the necessarily local differences among them, specifically the way that “themes chosen . . . have embodied a particular pertinence to the selected site” (Introduction 9). The most conspicuous feature of GCS is its exurban setting, the fact that the program is predicated on getting out of the city. The program thus offers a chance to consider what the natural world can teach us about citizenship, and it does so in large part because Grand Canyon provides contexts that reveal the historic and cultural contingency of the modern *civis* in at least five ways:

1. geologic time: Grand Canyon is a record of deep history, of time before human civilization;
2. cultural difference: modern European expansion is merely the most recent stage of human habitation of this region;
3. the National Park System: GCNP is one response by an increasingly urbanized culture to preserve natural areas;
4. tourism: a related desire of citizens from increasingly urbanized areas to marvel at the natural world; and
5. Glen Canyon Dam: the colonization of the Colorado River to provide electricity to millions of people in the Southwest United States and its attendant cultural and environmental costs.

The last two points are increasingly important because, for all its monumental character, Grand Canyon has an ecology that is remarkably sensitive to the effects of carbon emission on the global climate. While Grand Canyon is an ideal site for pursuing a variety of traditional disciplines—geology, anthropology, environmental studies, political science, economics, tourism studies—the integrative approach of CGS foregrounds the ongoing relationship between built and natural environments along with the ethical demands on us as regional, national, and global citizens. The term “connectedness” can be and often is used to denote the relation between interdisciplinary methodologies and a more properly ethical turn. In the course of making connections through a multidisciplinary approach to Grand Canyon, participants develop a sense of connectedness that goes beyond coursework to reach a new sense of not only their place in the world but also (one hopes) their agency to make it better.

THE LANDSCAPE OF INTEGRATIVE LEARNING AND REFLECTION IN GRAND CANYON SEMESTER

GCS addresses connection and connectedness primarily through a field- and lab-based science curriculum. Such instruction may be the original form of authentic learning by taking real field

data to quantify a real-world problem. Science methods and applications have always been and will always be a part of the GCS learning model, but the more recent inclusion of and shift toward integrative practices such as cultural mapping and Place as Text have provided a broader interdisciplinary framework for authentic field-based learning experiences as well as greater emphasis on self-reflective writing. David A. Kolb's cycle for experiential learning suggests that beginning with concrete, here-and-now experiences is the best way to add texture, life, and personal experience to learning. GCS takes this suggestion quite literally, creating a pedagogical schedule that takes students into the field to have concrete experiences and make observations before they learn and apply existing theories. For example, in one weeklong module entitled "Tourism," participants visit the South Rim of Grand Canyon, where they observe and speak with tourists, talk to park rangers and managers, and meet with local municipal leaders on a multi-day fact-finding mission. Days later, back in the classroom, students unpack their observations, reflecting on and comparing their learning to established theories and case studies. This practice is repeated throughout the semester in modules such as "River Management," "Sacred Landscapes," and "Wilderness": in each case, students enter the field, collect concrete experience and observations, and then participate in the rewriting and understanding of existing theories and literature. Through their own experiences and observations, students are empowered to discuss and challenge existing theories and management practices. These additions and revisions can be welcome and refreshing in a rapidly changing political and cultural landscape that is sometimes dominated by outdated modalities.

In the best-case scenario, students embrace the opportunity to contribute to new meaning and challenge existing norms. For those less inclined to challenge the status quo, experiential learning practices create and maintain the beginner's mind. In *Writing on Your Feet*, Sara E. Quay uses the "beginner's mind" analogy to show how instructors can move from the role of expert in the field to co-learner with students. We have adapted this theory and applied it to GCS participants. On the first day of the program, we take students

directly to the North Rim of Grand Canyon, a landscape so vast that it defies synthesis in simple terms, and we allow students to struggle with their thoughts and observations. Sometimes their academic training propels them to new realizations and applications. At other times, their academic training lets them down in this new and vast arena of learning—an experience that can be disorienting and frustrating for many honors students. We call this pedagogy keeping students “off balance,” where they are challenged to make new meaning, where safe academic risk-taking is required. This way of making meaning can be an entirely new landscape for even (or especially) the most experienced honors student, and it also presents a chance for students to build skills as well as self-confidence.

The effects of such pedagogy are typically measured through academic reflection. Among the many models for such work, Kolb’s remains the most influential with its emphasis on a recursive cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Two of the most common forms of reflection in Honors Semesters are mapping (and reflectional remapping) and the turning-point essay (Braid, “History” 8). Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, William W. Daniel writes of mapping as broadly conceptual (12–14), an activity by which one ultimately finds one’s own place in creating a sense of order. Robyn S. Martin has provided a thoughtful adaptation specific to GCS in what she calls an “end-of-semester” map, which she characterizes as a reiteration of the initial act of mapping in both Honors Semesters and *City as Text™* (CAT) that foregrounds the integration found in other kinds of reflection. This assignment, which is attractive in part because GCS is defined by large and culturally contested spaces, challenges students to see how and why their maps have changed over time as a result of the program (59). This practice of recursive mapping can be pushed yet further: How large should such a map be? How does the map express not only the connections among various disciplinary approaches to the immensity of Grand Canyon but also the connections between a mostly pristine and preserved landscape with the urban and suburban world from which most participants come and to which most return? The map,

as both literal artifact and conceptual tool, offers great potential for promoting civic engagement by encouraging participants to think about the connectivity between the setting and lessons of GCS and their personal and professional life once they leave Grand Canyon.

ASSESSING INTEGRATIVE LEARNING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN GRAND CANYON SEMESTER:

GRAND CANYON SEMESTER PARTICIPANT SURVEY RESPONSES

The question remains whether GCS has an impact on the civic engagement of the students who participated. One benefit of GCS's being a longstanding program is that we have access to some longitudinal data. In May 2019, a reunion of GCS participants was held at the South Rim of Grand Canyon. Participants from all years were invited to this four-day event that sought not only to connect old friends and allow them to reminisce but also to carry on the spirit of GCS with a service project with GCNP, ranger talks, camping, and hiking. The effort was spearheaded by GCS alumni with participation from GCS faculty. In all, over seventy GCS participants and faculty from 1999 to 2018 attended. Prior to the start of the event, a website was created to post information, answer questions, handle logistics, and collect RSVPs. A "Who's Who" message board and survey were also created to find out where people were currently living, what they had been up to, and if they would be attending. Two questions in particular generated some data on the impact of GCS practices on participant outcomes and professional status. To the first question—"What are you up to these days?"—respondents generally stated their career, professional activities, or volunteerism. From these answers, we could determine whether a participant had maintained the GCS core values of social justice, civic engagement, and conservation in their current work. The second question—"Did your participation in GCS influence what you are working on now (or in years past)? If so how?"—revealed if the learning experience of GCS had influenced the professional choices and outcomes of the participants. To this second question, one respondent said, "Absolutely! GCS sparked my fire as an environmental advocate.

I've built my career on public lands and wildlife conservation." Another stated, "Grand Canyon Semester completely changed my life and continues to reverberate through my daily work and experience. I became first a college lecturer and now a high school teacher because of GCS—and, specifically, a teacher interested in integrative, place-based teaching and learning." Another respondent, who is an outdoor recreation planner for the Bureau of Land Management, said simply, "Definitely. Found out people can be paid to do things outside!" A respondent who is an environmental educator said, "Absolutely—the experience galvanized my interest in environmental education and love of the outdoors. It shaped the way I view education and teaching. This type of learning resonated with me and it inspired the type of educator (as well as person, mother, etc!) I am today." Finally, a respondent from 2002 summed up the experience this way: "GCS instilled and solidified intrinsic values that guide my life and career."

Respondents in some cases offered specifics on formative events and program elements as part of their answer. One participant from 2012 who is currently working as a geographer and project manager for an international humanitarian nonprofit said, "My GCS thesis project focused on participatory mapping, which is now the focus of my career. I now work across the globe conducting and supporting participatory mapping projects for humanitarian efforts." Numerous respondents pointed to their independent research project as being formative to jump-starting their careers. A health-care worker in Phoenix said that GCS was her introduction to the lack of access to healthcare services in rural communities. Multiple participants stated that GCS helped them get internships in GCNP, which subsequently led to a career in the National Park Service. Two respondents focused on personal characteristics acquired during the program that led to their eventual success. One reported gaining a "sense of self" that was a turning point in life and shaped a career in botany while another claimed to acquire the ability to leave home and search for other internships throughout the country. Some respondents even pointed to specific assignments and events. One remembered a geology faculty member pulling over

the twelve-passenger van to show the students an overturned fault. This experience was raw and unscripted, as the student describes it, and taught them that they were in a “living laboratory.” Another student remembered a specific assignment: in 1999, and for years after, students were given a writing prompt entitled “Grand Canyon National Park: Image vs. Reality,” in which they were to compare their prior perceptions of Grand Canyon with what they observed; to this day the respondent, a teacher, uses this critical analysis style of inquiry with students.

In all, fifty-five participants answered the GCS reunion online survey. Their responses revealed who had a career in conservation and social justice and if their GCS experience contributed to that outcome; this information could be derived when respondents noted how GCS influenced their choices and when their career history revealed sustained involvement in issues of social and environmental justice. For example, one respondent said, “Absolutely! My semester determined much of who I am today. In my professional life I use place-based learning in my teaching. I also teach in an interdisciplinary program and love getting my students to consider issues from multiple perspectives so their knowledge/expertise has context.” This response is from a participant who now has a PhD in water resources and teaches environmental science courses at the university level. This comment demonstrates that the GCS experience directly influenced the respondent’s career.

These anecdotes, statistics, and stories go a long way toward revealing the effectiveness of integrated and experiential learning. Independent research projects in particular were shown to be formative by allowing students to go into depth on a topic of their choice. Field trips and real-world experiences led to internships and jobs that eventually led to careers. Treating the world—not just a classroom—as the place of learning allowed students to see the authentic, real-world application of course or program outcomes. One response deserves to be quoted at length:

I think the fact that we actively played a role in our own teaching, learning, cooking, and preparing (for activities) gave me agency because I was encouraged to practice small

bits of agency throughout GCS (through aforementioned teaching, learning, cooking, and preparing). Because GCS encouraged us to take responsibility for our thinking (through weekly Thought pieces), personal management (through Cook Groups and the like), professional endeavors (like independent, semester-long research projects), and learning (through student-facilitated discussions every Friday), in manageable, supported ways, when I have approached tasks in any of these categories since GCS, I feel ready to take them on. This pertains to planning my future, because the confidence I developed through claiming my own agency during GCS boosts me through the difficulty of applying for jobs/contacting graduate school advisers/recovering from rejection letters.

This account is useful for what it says about transferability, the term that ultimately lies behind the question “When will I ever use this?”—even (or especially) when “this isn’t my major.” One might describe transferability as the professional or life skills that are largely independent of the particular content of a course or program. The response above testifies to the value of the Honors Semester model in general, and one could readily replace “GCS” with the name of another program to create a statement that would likely resonate with many alumni. Some of this transferability seems directly related to the integrative learning elements in GCS: project-based assignments, inquiry, real-world field trips, and prompts that encourage critical analysis of complex issues. These high-impact practices (HIPs) encourage students to synthesize the lessons in one course with those of another course and emerge at the end of their education able to see their connection to the bigger picture.

Equally striking, however, is the extent to which respondents to the GCS survey emphasized benefits that seem specific to the location and content of GCS, including a lifelong commitment to environmental issues up to and including a career that would make a difference on those issues. This commitment should not be surprising given the high degree of self-selection among participants

in GCS. Not everyone is looking for a program that includes a weeklong rafting trip on the Colorado River, but those who are passionate about the outdoors and the environment may gravitate toward this program. The survey likewise involves self-selection since respondents who planned to attend the GCS reunion were likely predisposed to see the program as a positive experience. The responses nonetheless indicate two main points: GCS, perhaps like all Honors Semesters, appears to provide participants with key aptitudes (organization, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency) that are transferable and lead to meaningful personal and professional lives; and the program either instills or confirms in participants an ethics of conservation that, in turn, often leads to a long-term commitment to the environment. The most common narrative of success for GCS is that it takes students with at least a passing interest in the “local truths” embodied in this unique region and helps them see the potential for a life characterized by specific forms of civic engagement and professional fulfillment.

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