

Collaborative Analysis of Alaska Partners in the Parks Experience

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The world is a book and those who do not travel only read one page.

– St. Augustine

Partners in the Parks (PITP) is an outdoor experiential-learning program coordinated by the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). The NCHC is a collaborative organization with members who strive to enhance honors education, providing inventive and experiential-learning opportunities as well as scholarships. In PITP, honors students from across the country apply to go on week-long programs to various national parks around the United States. In 2023, they offered programs in Mammoth Cave National Park, the Appalachian Trail, and Glacier National Park. Honors faculty organize and plan these week-long trips after receiving approval by the NCHC, and students camp in the national parks with honors faculty and peers to take in the natural beauty of the United States National Park System. Each program focuses on the history of the national park and the surrounding area, its natural environment and wildlife, and the unique culture that is present. There is also a community-service component, and professors tailor the type of community service to fit the overall theme of the trip. Throughout the trip, honors students and professors reflect on the information they have learned.

This commentary reflects Jonathan Miller's and Chase Burdick's experiences in Sitka, Alaska. Chase is a biology major from Smethport, Pennsylvania, and Jonathan is from Newville, Pennsylvania, majoring in marketing and management. We both attend Shippensburg University Wood Honors College in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. We chose the Alaskan Partners in the Parks trip to step out of our comfort zone and learn in a different setting. When traveling to Sitka, our PITP leaders implored that we approached our trip as more than just tourists. Instead, they encouraged us to speak with locals, hear their stories, and truly immerse ourselves

in the culture. To express what we learned from our colleagues in the PITP program, the locals, and our evolving perspectives, we decided that a two-author publication would be the best means to show differing opinions and experiences while highlighting all aspects of Partners in the Parks trips for our academic community. While the manuscript reflects 2 differing perspectives, 11 individuals from honors colleges around the country attended the trip to Sitka in the summer of 2022. We hope to showcase that with immersive community-engaged programs, everyone will experience their own perspectives and that is part of the beauty.

Reflection: Chase Burdick

Community engagement is a term with ever-changing connotations. I could review a dozen different definitions and still never grasp the true meaning until participating in community-oriented projects and experiences. Prior to this trip, I understood community service primarily pertains to my participating in activities where I provide work in one direction to another party. My whole life, I had been taught to help the people closest to me. My ideology of community service changed when we went on the Alaskan PITP experience.

We were camping together, which meant collaborating with others to complete a common goal. Without the support from my peers, the common goal of health and wellness was not possible. After becoming settled within the group, we eventually started to have campfire conversations nightly, which provided time for in-depth reflection. Our conversations allowed us to become familiar with each other and work as a cohesive unit quickly, which became useful when our group participated in the community-service project with the Sitka Maritime Heritage

Society, a nonprofit organization that focuses on preserving and sharing maritime history in the Sitka area.

Our group provided three hours of community service to help rehabilitate the Japonski Island Boathouse. The directors of the organization split our group into sections with individuals tearing off boards, painting boards, painting windows, and sanding boards for repair. The directors said they often have limited hours and only two staff members, so when groups as large as ours offer their time and assistance, they are extremely grateful. The directors said the work our group accomplished in three hours would have taken them two weeks to complete. During our experience, we got to also speak firsthand with the volunteers of the nonprofit organization, who spoke about the history of Sitka as well as the Japonski Island Boathouse. The Japonski Island Boathouse was erected just before World War II and was the only defense installation in the North Pacific operating when World War II began. In the 1980s, the boathouse was acquired by the state and was abandoned. The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society began rehabilitation in the mid-2000s with intentions of using it for local boat repair, maritime activities, and education.

Throughout our experiential-learning trip, our group met many locals, allowing us to ask them complex questions. For example, in Sitka, the logging scene can feel almost nonexistent, therefore the forests are thick with trees. I asked about the logging scene in Sitka, which turned out to be a complicated political issue within the community, where many in the community did not want to touch the local environment, but others fought on the side of industry and economy. Learning about local culture *from* the local community encourages intellectual engagement and allows for further understanding of the world. My experience transformed the original idea of community service beyond the surface level of simply providing a service; the interactions I had with the locals allowed for community outreach and understanding. As a group, we brought our experiences to the campfire conversations in the presence of our PITP honors faculty to further engage with our experiences. Cultural engagement is crucial in my future of being a doctor, as having a broad knowledge of all cultures will help to maintain a personal connection to my potential patients. Embedded community-service projects can lead to bi-directional learning and further community understanding with the addition of outreach and effort.

I now realize that my community is not limited to my geographical location. My “bubble” has been expanded on the basis that others are grateful when other individuals are giving. Usually, I give my service, which benefits my local community. In my experiences with the Alaskan PITP program, I provided service but gained cultural insights and local information with my broader community. While our trip was only a week-long experiential-learning opportunity, the experiences and impact on my individual character will be remembered for a lifetime. Words cannot express the friendships that I formed in Sitka, Alaska. My experience was an eye-opening endeavor and provided a basis for professional aspirations outside of Pennsylvania.

In Alaska, we heard many folktales and legends specific to their culture. The totem pole is an iconic symbol of the Alaskan culture. On our trip, we learned at the Sitka National Historical Park that many indigenous tribes view “the bottom of the totem pole” as a prestigious place to be. Alaskan folklore says that the lowest symbol on the totem pole represents an individual or group in which the story begins. The lowest symbol is the most important, and after the beginning, the following symbols leading to the top represent future events that revolve around this foundational symbol to tell the complete story. My trip to Alaska feels like that foundational symbol, and I am excited to expand upward to see what my story is yet to bring.

Reflection: Jonathan Miller

Everything I have read in college textbooks was written by an author who was a primary source on the topic or an outsider who used primary sources. Textbooks, journals, and other academic sources are useful resources for the gist of an idea. When I went to Alaska, I knew the main components of the state’s history, important historical events, and the nature and wildlife I would see. However, the goal of our trip was not to reaffirm what we already knew, but instead to challenge what we didn’t know. That’s the difference between a tourist and a traveler. If I was a tourist, the “textbook knowledge” would be all the information I needed to have a productive trip. As a traveler, not only did I want to leave with more information, but I also wanted to leave with different levels of understanding and new perspectives that would be unobtainable from a textbook.

To a traveler, the knowledge of what happened is not enough. The different perspectives about what happened, as well as the events and consequences

that followed, are what's important. One example that illustrates the differences in mindset between a tourist and a traveler can be seen in the historical implications of Castle Hill, the site of the Alaska Purchase—the transference of the Alaskan Territory from Russia to the United States in 1867. Castle Hill was one of the most important geopolitical moves between the two governments that had positive effects for both countries. For a tourist, these are the only perspectives and pieces of information needed to understand the significance of the Alaska Purchase. As a traveler, the voices of the Alaska Natives are the missing perspective that is vital to understanding the Alaska Purchase, which is not often found or accessible in textbooks. While the American flag was being hoisted on a flagpole surrounded by large ships firing their cannons and music blaring in celebration, the Alaska Natives sat quietly in their canoes in the Indian River watching their land be sold without their permission. The land that they have lived on for thousands of years—and fought for mightily at the Battle of Sitka in 1804—was being sold right in front of them.

As a traveler, there are limits to the amount of knowledge you can find. For some events, there are thousands of sources, detailing the events and happenings down to the smallest detail. However, for many small events, there may only be a few items or pieces of information available. What happens when you are restricted from being told the complete story? This happened to my group and me when we went to Sitka National Historical Park. At the park was a totem pole carver working on his latest creation. Our group watched him use traditional hand-crafted tools to chisel the wood. After a while, he took a break and came close to the area where we were all watching him work. A member of our group asked the totem pole carver the story behind the creation. The carver calmly looked at us and said, “This isn’t my story to tell, so I will not share.” Our group was not original in our question; people would continuously ask him the same question about the story behind the totem pole, and yet his answer remained the same.

At first, many of our group members were very frustrated with the carver. We had traveled thousands of miles to learn more about Alaska, and now that we had reached the destination, we couldn’t get the answers that we had been looking for. The event with the carver happened on our first day and gave our group a lot of time to ponder the situation. At our nightly campfires, we discussed the possible motives behind the carver not telling

the story. Eventually, we rationalized that the carver did not tell us the story because he wanted the tribe to share their story about the totem pole when they unveiled the totem pole to the public. For centuries, Alaska Natives have had their stories told by others and have not been able to voice their own narratives in the way that they want to. Even though our group was genuinely interested in the story behind the totem pole, did we deserve to know? We had not offered the totem pole carver anything, but we expected the answers to come easily. Our emotions went from frustration and even anger to admiration for a group who wanted to hold onto something of their own. As travelers, this is the fine line between learning and intruding; not every question can be answered, nor are we deserving of the answer.

Tourists interact with new communities on a surface level. These are interactions that occur with normal daily functions, such as buying items from local shops, eating lunch at local restaurants, and moving through common public places. Community understanding as a traveler looks significantly different. Travelers seek out new information with the excitement to learn about new cultures that could change their existing perspectives. The story with the totem pole carver highlights the difference between the outreach of a tourist and a traveler. The tourist may have brushed the encounter off after a few days or taken the totem pole carver’s answer as rude. The traveler thinks about the reasons behind why the totem pole carver refused to answer our question.

As a student majoring in business, I will interact with customers, suppliers, and fellow employees. Surface-level interactions with my colleagues will not help me effectively do my job. To be successful, I need to have a deeper understanding of where my colleagues are coming from. When disagreements arise, it will be crucial to know their experiences and understand their suggestions to develop a compromise that will positively impact the business. The PITP trip to Sitka has made me consciously aware of the importance of engagement and how I will need to incorporate these practices in the workplace.

Conclusion

This trip has changed the way we travel and how we view and interact with our respective and broadened communities. In our Alaskan PITP experience, we found ourselves grappling with the profound distinction between being a tourist and a traveler. Our reflections highlight

the transformative impact of community understanding, urging fellow college students and professors to embrace the traveler's mindset. Beyond the confines of textbooks, our Alaskan journey became a testament to the power of experiential education, challenging our preconceptions and cultivating a new understanding of diverse perspectives. Our reflections stress the importance for educators and students to go beyond the boundaries of conventional knowledge, urging a lifelong commitment to exploring, understanding, and meaningfully contributing to the world.

About the Authors

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