

ELON UNIVERSITY

The Elon Gap Semester is a highly experiential transition program for first semester, first year Elon students. It focuses on the student's development of their leadership skills, group dynamics, community engagement, and global citizenship in their first semester as Elon students. The experience begins with a 3+ week wilderness expedition with the National Outdoor Leadership School in western Wyoming earning two credits in environmental ethics and two credits in outdoor leadership.

The semester continues with a 1 credit service learning course travelling across the country through 4 stops each with a unique learning opportunity. A rotating faculty or staff member joins the group for a service week at a time. The first week is in Pine Ridge, SD focusing on the culture, traditions, and history of the Lakota people. The second week is in St. Louis, MO examining urban hunger and following locally grown food through an organization's non-profit network to see how a local problem is being solved using local resources. The third week is in Harlan, KY understanding the historical interconnectedness of mining in Appalachia and the affect it's had on the local culture and environment. The fourth week is in Washington DC investigating the reality as a homeless person and then learning about ways to get involved and supporting causes they've learned about on the experience or with ones they've already been involved. Speakers are scheduled to add depth and diversity of opinion or experience during each week.

The semester experience ends with a six-week homestay program in Costa Rica. Students earn two credits in Spanish language studies and two credits in Culture of Costa Rica. During the week, students will be in class, living with a homestay family. On the weekends, the group will leave the city and explore much of the rest of the country. After the semester is complete, students begin in Winter Term when they will take an Elon 101 course in addition to a course of their choosing. Some of the unique, innovative aspects of the program are:

- The only university administrated experiential education program with domestic and international components that we know of
- Students do not spend a single day of their first semester as Elon students on Elon's campus
- Students register for classes and housing from Costa Rica for the spring semester
- Local speakers will present to the students about diversity issues
 - Lakota women's cultural role and family role
 - Hunger through the eyes of the provider
 - Coal industry safety, education and miner training
 - Faces of Homelessness Speakers Panel: Experiences from living on the streets of DC
- Students have no technology or communication with anyone outside of the group throughout the wilderness expedition

- Techniques to aid the student transition to campus through these experiences are incorporated throughout the semester
 - Cohort experience
 - Bringing Elon faculty and staff to join the group and be a part of the experience throughout the service learning course
 - Document their experience in a way that reflects on what happens, processes those experiences, and incorporates them into their lives giving them a way to concisely talk about their experiences when asked about them
 - Elon 101 in Winter Term
- They are the only students that begin their on-campus Elon experience during winter term

Sincerely,

Steve Morrison
Coordinator of Gap Programs