



Where Work, Play and Study Combine

New Environmental Leadership Projects Partner Students with Local Organizations

Separating Deonne VanderWoude from forests and streams would be like cutting off oxygen to a flame or yanking the thread from a loom. The MA Environmental Leadership student from South Dakota explores the wild in her off time, protects it in her on time and attends classes about it in-between.

“Healing nature comes from changing how people conceive of the natural world,” she says. “We *are* nature; we’re a species in the world.”

Now in her final semester, VanderWoude is focused on a thesis project representative of the Environmental Leadership Department’s heightened emphasis on community engagement. In 2003, she received two exciting notifications on the same day—the first offering her a job with the Colorado State Forest Service and the second announcing her acceptance to Naropa University. She took on both, working full time while taking a few classes each semester. Four years later, she works for Boulder City Open Space and Mountain Parks as a resource monitoring technician and is wrapping up her degree by studying trail usage in Open Space areas. VanderWoude’s ability to fulfill her graduation requirement while simultaneously gathering information valuable to her employer is what makes her project special.

The Environmental Leadership Program is implementing an Applied Leadership Project wherein students design a plan to improve the institutional and environmental sustainability of a participating organization or community. Students spend time with their chosen organization, observing practices and determining methods to best accomplish their goals. The projects involve research and data gathering, as well as formal proposals for action. And, once a project has been implemented, the initiating student evaluates its success in a final report presented to both the department and the organization at the capstone seminar.

“The student designs his or her leadership project in direct collaboration and consultation with an organization,” says Anne Parker, chair of Environmental Studies. “In this way they can apply their leadership skills directly to a real world situation during their education.... It is different from an internship because it is an innovative offering to the organization rather than simply learning the work.... In our search for comparable MA programs across the country, we did not find any with this style of sophisticated applied work.”

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Examples of past projects that functioned similarly include developing an effective process of documenting vegetation change through the use of before-and-after photography for a nonprofit and spearheading the design of an interactive website that invites new residents to participate in local environmental work for a recycling organization.

VanderWoude’s project focuses on how well hikers understand leave no trace principles, a set of recreational guidelines developed by the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies. “The city’s open space and mountain parks receive 5.3 million visitors each year,” she says, “and I’m trying to get individuals to realize they do have a collective impact, that we don’t want to degrade the land more than we have to. We can’t have the mindset that says ‘I’m just one person; how could I affect the land?’ because when a million people think that way, it adds up in a hurry.”

What is now known as Chautauqua Park was one of the first land areas preserved by the emerging community of Boulder in 1898 and, seventy-eight years later, Boulder became the first U.S. city to approve a sales tax dedicated to buying open space. Managing that open space, now totaling nearly 44,000 acres, has become a top priority due to national trends that show hikers in urban, day-use areas outnumbering backcountry hikers 5 to 1.

VanderWoude distributed surveys at heavily trafficked trailheads such as Marshall Mesa, which is adjacent to Highway 93. Her questions tested knowledge and practice of such precepts as sticking to the trail, not littering and cleaning up after pets. VanderWoude then took up a position no more than a quarter mile from the same trail and gathered information through personal observation. Results from the study will help land managers better improve both resource protection and the visitor experience.

Such efforts allow VanderWoude to apply her Naropa training in a real-world situation but, she says, it’s not the first time her vocation and her academics have complemented one another. “The class on systems thinking,” she says, “was one of my favorites and, by actually doing what I was studying, I gained a lot of insight into the readings. In turn, contemplative aspects have helped me understand how much the definition of nature can depend upon culture and language.

“When I first visited Naropa, I met Forrest Ketchin, one of the founders of the environmental [studies] program, and it was like talking to myself twenty years from now. She had red hair and an anthropology background like myself, plus the same outlook on life. I knew I wanted grad school to be more intimate, a less square-box experience, and I was really into how Naropa teaches the *whole* student. Then, what really got me was a quote by Chögyam Trungpa on the department advertisement:

When human beings lose their connection to nature, to heaven and earth, then they do not know how to nurture their environment. Healing our society goes hand in hand with healing our personal, elemental connection with the phenomenal world.

For Environmental Leadership students, the Applied Leadership Project will strengthen their ability to lead while simultaneously providing organizations with environmentally sustainable models for accomplishing their work. What once was theory will become tangible.

As for VanderWoude, once the data is compiled and her project submitted to the department, she should be ready to conclude her Naropa journey and graduate this May. Her influence, however, will surely continue to be felt in the world of natural resource management, a vocation she has no intention of leaving. When asked about her plans for the future, her biggest decision consists only of *where* she will work with nature. Perhaps she’ll stay in Colorado...but then Montana sounds nice...or maybe Alaska.

—O. Johnson