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Honoring the National Parks: A Local Adaptation of a Partners in the Parks Adventure

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INTRODUCTION

The National Collegiate Honors Council has long recognized that collaboration among institutions is important to honors education. Since its inception over five decades ago, NCHC has promoted the mutual exchange of ideas about honors in order to disseminate the best of these ideas as potential prototypes (Andrews). In addition to its annual NCHC conferences, which offer a large forum for sharing ideas, NCHC has fostered and supported a variety of collaborative programs such as Honors Semesters and Faculty Institutes, the most recent of which is the Partners in the Parks Program (PITP), which—like its predecessor programs—is designed not only

to provide educational opportunities for students and faculty in honors but to inspire educational innovations within honors programs and colleges across the country. PITP has already begun to spin off such innovations. The adaptation of the PITP program “Fire Island to Ellis Island” in a college course called “Honoring the Parks” demonstrates the way that colleges and universities can use NCHC resources to inspire new educational opportunities on their campuses.

Partners in the Parks became an NCHC experiential learning program in 2008. Designed to inspire commitment to America’s national parks, PITP is “predicated on a three-fold purpose: **to educate** students about the national parks, **to engage** them in recreational activities that are the essence of park experiences, and ultimately **to urge stewardship** of these treasured spaces through a lifetime of involvement” (Digby). In only four years the program already has more than three hundred alumni and an expanding number of national park venues (see Appendix). These week-long immersion seminars, in which students and faculty along with National Park Service (NPS) park rangers study a park from multiple perspectives, were not initially designed as credit-bearing courses, yet within a few years of the pilot program at Bryce Canyon, colleges started offering such experiences for credit. Heather Thiessen-Reily, Director of Honors at Western State College of Colorado, developed a PITP week at Black Canyon of the Gunnison as a rigorous three-credit course open to students from all NCHC programs and colleges; she describes the evolution and content of this course in *Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks* (Digby, ch.3). In addition to courses specifically structured for credit, some member institutions that send students to PITP programs offer their participants credit based on journals, papers, or creative projects presented as evidence of learning outcomes worthy of academic credit.

In the adaptation we discuss below, a PITP program became the model for a course at a local college. The PITP host institution for “Fire Island to Ellis Island” is LIU, a mid-size private university with an urban (Brooklyn) and suburban (Post) campus in close proximity to a variety of NPS sites. Dormitory housing on both campuses allows the program to move students from Long Island to New York City over the course of a week. St. Francis College, by contrast, is a small, private institution housed in a single building in Brooklyn with no dormitory facilities. Despite the differences in host institutions, the variety and density of NPS sites in close proximity inspired the shaping of a course for commuter students at St. Francis. Particularly in view of the current emphasis on environmental issues and field-based learning, participating

in PITP programs might help faculty develop new courses well-adapted to their home campuses.

“FIRE ISLAND TO ELLIS ISLAND” (JOAN DIGBY)

Like NCHC’s City as Text™, Partners in the Parks appears to be developing a life of its own generating creative permutations that evolve naturally from local sites and participating institutions. During the summer of 2010, when LIU offered “Fire Island to Ellis Island” for a second time, Kathleen Nolan of St. Francis College in Brooklyn joined the program as a marine biologist with expertise in dune ecology. She camped with us on Fire Island and led field workshops introducing the students to dune habitats and local marine life.

Bringing together students and faculty from a variety of two- and four-year, public and private, large and small colleges and universities combines multiple perspectives in a way that energizes conversation and spawns new ideas. “Fire Island to Ellis Island,” for example, attracted students from two- and four-year schools in Florida, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and California. For some, it was their first visit to New York. One student at a school in Boston turned out to be a native of Long Island who had travelled to Fire Island on his family’s boat many times before. He was amazed to discover how little he knew about that place as well as many of the other NPS sites in New York City venues. His revelation about how PITP can teach students to see even familiar landscapes with new vision ultimately gave Nolan an idea about offering a course for her Brooklyn students based on this quite local adventure that included many sites within commuting distance of St. Francis College.

In the “Fire Island to Ellis Island” PITP program, the NPS sites range from National Seashore to urban monuments and museums, and, although they may seem disparate, the two lenses through which we study this environment—water as a factor of local habitats and immigration as the historical essence of New York—are intimately related. New York is a city of islands stretching from Brooklyn and Queens to Montauk Point at the tip of Long Island; it is a landscape surrounded by water and deeply connected to the fishing and shipping industries and the port of New York. The history of New York, including its great lyrical poet Walt Whitman, begins on Long Island and moves west to “Manahatta.” There, in the great harbor at the confluence of two rivers, the Statue of Liberty presides as the iconic symbol of immigrant entry to America.

The week begins on Long Island in Oyster Bay (founded in 1653) Harbor, where students have the experience of sailing on a reconstructed nineteenth-century, gaff-rigged oyster sloop. Before Partners in the Parks came into being, I took my LIU Post honors program freshmen sailing on *Christeen* for a “harbor as text” mapping exercise. They studied the geological formation of Long Island, the marine animals dredged from the bottom, and the demographics reflected in boats on the water from Coast Guard patrols and oystermen to sailing schools and private yachts. Most of my students are native Long Islanders, and many engage in sailing and fishing; some even eat oysters, but, like most of us, few had ever applied analytical reflections to their home territory—all the more reason to integrate local, experiential learning into honors programs as a basic tool of developing awareness.

Also located in Oyster Bay is Sagamore Hill, the summer White House of President Theodore Roosevelt, who was instrumental in creating the National Park Service. Superintendent Tom Ross has been eager to host PITP, and on our last visit we were treated to a meeting with the architect in charge of the current restoration, a major NPS project that will take several years. On this occasion, the students assisted in landscape renovation by removing invasive Norway maple saplings so that the grounds could be restored to native species in place during Roosevelt’s tenure. Volunteer service is a key component of PITP, and Nolan’s 2011 course scoped out several places for future involvement. Her participation in the PITP “Fire Island to Ellis Island” trip also had a shaping influence on group dynamics that, in turn, inspired some of the curriculum and weather-related flexibility of the course that she developed.

In May 2010, Nolan’s sessions on barrier dune ecology and marine biology concluded on a rainy night with “Ecology Bingo,” an impromptu game she created based on the technical vocabulary she had earlier taught. This entertainment bonded her with the group so that, when she appeared again later in the week, students were most welcoming. She rejoined them for a self-guided neighborhood walk on The Lower East Side as a prelude to The Tenement Museum, a site run by the National Park Service that she later incorporated into her course. Nolan had already been thinking about modeling a class on “Fire Island to Ellis Island,” so her participation provided the opportunity to try out some of the components and consider how they might work for a cohort of commuter students from Brooklyn likely to see suburban and rural Long Island as exotic territory.

The PITP committee recommends that, before hosting a PITP program, faculty should first take part in one as a learning experience. A week of

observation is useful in developing a project and understanding how important it is to:

- cultivate relationships with the park supervisor and rangers;
- spend enough time in the park to plan activities;
- get to know the territory and learn how to navigate the site;
- develop an itinerary with morning, afternoon, and, if possible, evening programs;
- put together a set of readings that includes additional material in the event that weather conditions require alternative learning options; and
- understand the ultimate outcomes that are likely to result from the program.

As a participant in “Fire Island to Ellis Island,” Nolan observed the structure of a program that moved from site to site on a daily basis, which is not typical of most PITP programs, and we shifted from NPS recreational park sites on Long Island to New York City sites that illustrated the National Park Service involvement in monuments and museums. This model became useful in constructing a course based on moving commuter students to different venues for day-long sessions. Because this PITP program included city parks as well as NPS sites, this diversity also came to play a role in the course that evolved. The comparison between national and city parks and, in some other programs, state parks is a permutation of consciousness that has been developing as a sub-text of *Partners in the Parks*.

In “Fire Island to Ellis Island” we first camp on the National Seafont and then days later visit Olmstead’s Central Park and the new High Line, a city park constructed from old railroad tracks in the lower Manhattan meat-packing district, now planted with indigenous flowers and grasses. We process our responses to these sites by holding “circle” discussions in the parks, allowing us to contextualize such different places through the immediacy of observation. Students participating in “Fire Island to Ellis Island” also engage in a photography workshop at the beginning of the week, so their sensitivity to place and ability to record landscapes through a photographer’s eye sharpen as we progress. At the end of the week, when the students make their presentations to the group, an edited selection of their photographs helps them tell the story of their journey.

Unlike many of the PITP adventures, the New York experience is not strictly about nature. Once in the city, investigations largely shift from nature-watching to people-watching. Although we arrive on Liberty Island early in the morning, by the time we take the ferry to Ellis Island the crowds have swelled. Along the wall of names people search for ancestors who passed through the forbidding entry hall. How these immigrants lived in New York is dramatized in the reconstructed apartments of Jewish, Italian, and Irish families in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum run by NPS. Experiencing the inside of typical tenement apartments makes students aware of similar buildings that are visible in every neighborhood of the city and that still house people who have come to New York from all over the world. In one long day of city walks, the group travels from Chinatown to Harlem. Part of the adventure includes the experience of cuisines representing various immigrant cultures that are in a constant state of flux, which is nowhere more visible than on our final walk across the Brooklyn Bridge amid throngs of young people from all over the world who now call Brooklyn home.

Some of these young people are students at St. Francis College, a small institution housed in a single building near Brooklyn Borough Hall. How this PITP program was transformed into a three-credit course at St. Francis College in Brooklyn is a model for collaboration among institutions and for adapting NCHC programs to institutional contexts.

HONORING THE PARKS (KATHLEEN NOLAN)

I developed the curriculum for Honoring the Parks, a three-credit course at St. Francis College, as an adaptation of “Fire Island to Ellis Island” because I saw potential for engaging my students in a new understanding of their home environment. Although St. Francis students are, for the most part, native New Yorkers familiar with the city, they are generally unfamiliar with the National Parks even in their immediate locale. Having witnessed the degree to which students engaged in PITP cultivate their ability to “read” and interpret an environment, I made the decision to create a two-week course that included Fire Island as well as several of the New York City National Parks sites that are accessible for commuter students, who, with the exception of one overnight camping experience, were able to return to their homes each evening. For all these students, the itinerary was a stretch of their energy as well as imagination. Few had previous camping experience, and many had never visited any of the chosen parks and monuments within the city.

The students paid tuition and earned three credits as part of a two-week mini-mester in May 2011. The course was open to both honors program students and biology majors with GPAs above 3.2. Since I am a marine biologist, the course emphasized habitats, resident species, and the diversity of local biological environments. We visited many of the same venues as “Fire Island to Ellis Island,” but I also added others suitable to education in biology: Jamaica Bay (Gateway National Park), which is a major migratory path for birds; Great Kills National Park on Staten Island, which presents the opportunity to view unusual vegetation; and Brooklyn Bridge Park, a new city park that is contiguous with the National Parks system of the New York Harbor and provides access to the East River, where students were able to study diverse fish aggregations.

Although some students took the course for biology credit, others were permitted to take it for general honors program credit or for non-majors’ science credit. Honors courses at St. Francis are not assessed by traditional testing; students complete a reading list, submit a book report, write a reflective paper and give a PowerPoint presentation on an assigned theme. For this course, the required texts included diverse background material on the local sites, including Howard Markel’s book *Quarantine!: East European Jewish Immigrants and the New York City Epidemics of 1892* and the DVD of Ken Burns’s *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. A book report on *Quarantine!* was linked to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The Ken Burns series introduced students to national parks in other geographical regions so that they could research the history and geography of a place they might visit in a future PITP or other context. The reflective paper for the course was based on readings about Governor’s Island and the stakeholders involved in bidding for use of the property. Because students in the course had a number of complex projects to produce for assessment, the groups first met on campus for four days of scheduled lectures to prepare them for the experiential component of the following two weeks.

The syllabus had two discrete components. The first week was devoted to a variety of natural settings and the second week to mostly urban NPS museums and monuments. In addition to the set of readings, students received problems, observations, and experiments that included a debate over the future land use of Governor’s Island, a bird-watching assignment in Jamaica Bay, an analysis of water quality on Staten Island, and a diversity index of fish caught in the East River.

Like PITP, the course emphasized the ecological, recreational, aesthetic, and historical significances of the parks, and, like the PITP adventure “Fire Island to Ellis Island,” the course underwent some impromptu transformation as a result of heavy rain.

In keeping with the PITP tradition, I had planned to camp with the students at Watch Hill on Fire Island, and St. Francis College had purchased five Coleman four-person tents. Two weeks prior to the course students with little or no camping experience practiced setting up the tents in a classroom. The students arrived on Fire Island in light drizzle and were able to set up tents and cook a meal. Ranger Valentine engaged the students in an ecological exploration, and, when it poured the next morning, she came through for these students, as she had done the previous year for the 2010 PITP group, with a perfectly dry house. Maintaining amiable relationships with park rangers has proven to be essential.

Alternative planning is essential. When another storm prevented the students from observing horseshoe crabs mating in Jamaica Bay, we were able to watch an introductory segment of Ken Burns’s *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. Later in the week we were again thwarted when, intending to do an experiment on water quality on Staten Island, we were deterred by not just rain but lightning. The students thus had some reflective time to consider the multiple uses of national parks, including the recreation and nature study that Mother Nature had prevented them from doing.

We were grateful for the half-hour of sun that enabled our canoe trip in Jamaica Bay, part of the Gateway National Recreational Area managed by NPS. Many students had never been in a canoe, and so the experience was exhilarating for them. Viewing Riis Park from the water allowed students to observe many species of shore birds that were unfamiliar to the group. Students also went bird watching with the Audubon Society at an area of the park called Dead Horse Bay, where they were disturbed to discover the origin of the name and its connection to glue factories once located here. Though the area has been reclaimed, the beach is still littered with old glass bottles and would be a natural site for a volunteer PITP clean-up project.

Another section of the park is Floyd Bennett Field, New York’s first municipal airport, where people now fly model airplanes in connection with a museum of historic aircraft. One of the themes that emerged from the Queens segment of the course was the reclamation of wasteland for conversion into park sites, a resonant urban theme that might be expanded in the future both in my course and in the next PITP iteration of “Fire Island to Ellis Island.”

From Queens, the course then moved to Staten Island, a borough yet to be included in PITP. At least five of the seventeen students had never ridden on the free Staten Island Ferry even though they are native New Yorkers. Our destination was the Great Kills National Park, another wasteland reclamation site, which has a beachfront, freshwater swamp, and interesting vegetation. From the ferry, a train ride and a two-mile walk got us to the beach, where a thunderstorm forced us to abandon the water quality experiments.

Again an alternative learning experience filled in. The students were given an article to read about Governor's Island on the train/ferry rides home. They showed scant interest in reading until the assignment was framed as a contest. Each of five teams had to make a convincing case that their group would be the one to develop Governor's Island, with the groups each representing actual bidders for the site: casino developers; New York University, a private institution of higher learning; the City University of New York, a public institution of higher learning; environmentalists; and an artists' collective. Students read, took copious notes and presented their arguments on the ferry back to Manhattan. Even though most were not in favor of this option, the casino developers gave the best presentation!

During the second week, the urban component that included the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, we had a welcome break in the weather. A warm afternoon found us walking through the streets of Manhattan to the African Burial Ground, discovered by accident during the excavation for a federal office building. Over 50,000 African American graves, paved over during the growth of the city, were discovered and memorialized, and the NPS walking tour now provides a very positive example of the park service's commitment to historical research.

On the last day of the course the group went seining at the Brooklyn Bridge Park in the same borough as St. Francis College. We calculated a diversity index for the East River based on our catch, which included moon jellyfish, grass shrimp, silverside fish, bay anchovies, tomcod, striped bass, invasive Japanese crab, and a Northern pipefish, which looks like a straightened seahorse. The students were amazed to see this rich marine life in what was once polluted water, and thus we had a final lesson in the role parks play in reclamation.

Using the PITP practice of student evaluation, we asked participants in the course to rate their experiences on a 1–5 Likert scale, with 5 being “informed me the most.” Their three top choices were (1) Tenement Museum, (2) Floyd Bennett Field canoeing, and (3) Brooklyn Bridge Park. The students may

have felt most comfortable in the Tenement Museum because it was in a busy urban environment. Since many of our students are first-generation college attendees, their top choice may well reflect their empathy toward immigrants. In the future, we will design a survey to assess students' comfort level with various environments.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN “FIRE ISLAND TO ELLIS ISLAND” AND HONORING THE PARKS

The major influence of the PITP program on the credit-bearing course at St. Francis College is obvious in the list of features they have in common:

1. Students engage in an intensive learning experience in regional parks and museum/monument sites that stretch from rural Long Island to the urban boroughs.
2. Students develop an understanding of the historical, ecological, and recreational dimensions of parks as well as the opportunity for research and volunteer work within these environments.
3. Students bond as a result of the time frame and intensity of the experience.
4. Students develop their abilities to do collaborative work and share their reflections.
5. “Circles” function as a superb reflective method of processing information and bringing the group together on a daily basis to review experiences and learning.
6. Students gain sensitivity to the national parks as well as awareness of the operational differences among national, state, and local parks.
7. As a result of their experiences students might bring family and friends to visit these parks.
8. Final student presentations bring closure to the experience.

Some difference between the PITP program and the course include the following:

1. While students engaged in the PITP program are expected to read a selection of essays and to produce writing and visual responses to the

- sites, their work is not evaluated in any formal way. Students in the credit-bearing course are under pressure to produce materials that will be assessed.
2. While students attending a PITP seminar have email contact with the leaders prior to the week, students in the course meet for four days in advance of the experiential component.
 3. While students attending a PITP program attend a variety of two- and four-year colleges around the country, students in the St. Francis course come from the same institution and are local to the area; thus, they cannot bring the different sets of perceptions and awareness that arise in a multi-regional, multi-institutional group.
 4. Students commuting each day to a new site and returning home at night do not have the opportunity to spend much recreational time together and intensify the bonding that takes place in a PITP seminar. The commuters did, however, achieve some degree of bonding during their one-night camping experience.
 5. Nevertheless, because students come from the area local to the parks, they have a greater opportunity to revisit the parks and deepen their interest.
 6. Local students have a greater opportunity to explore research, job or volunteer possibilities in these venues.

CONCLUSION

The collaboration between LIU Post and St. Francis College that took place through an NCHC Partners in the Parks program is one example of the way NCHC offers opportunities for innovation in pedagogy and curriculum. The PITP programs are inter-institutional versions of the team teaching that many of us do or wish we could do on our home campuses, offering opportunities to gain fresh ideas about how to structure learning, approach academic subjects, and excite students. The synergy and cross-fertilization that arise from such collaboration can reenergize teachers and inspire students. When members of the teaching team include park rangers and the class meets in some of the most spectacular settings in the United States, the results are exceptional experiences available to students in the whole range of honors programs and colleges represented in the NCHC. Most of all, we recommend

the synergy that arises from institutional collaboration and creative learning models. Linked to national parks around the nation, PITP adventures draw local colleges into rich course programming that develops student sensitivity, understanding, and commitment to natural landscapes, wildlife, environmental resources, and thoughtful stewardship.

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APPENDIX

Partners in the Parks Projects to Date

Park	Date	Director(s)
Acadia	2008, 2009 2012	Kathleen King, University of Maine-Augusta Gregory Fahy, University of Maine-Augusta
Black Canyon	2009, 2010 2012	Heather Thiessen-Reily, Western State College of Colorado of the Gunnison
Bryce Canyon	2008, 2009 2012	Matt Nickerson and Todd Petersen, Southern Utah University
Cape Hatteras	2010	Bill Atwill, University of North Carolina Wilmington
Cedar Breaks	2009, 2010 2012	Matt Nickerson and Todd Petersen, Southern Utah University
Denali	2010	Channon Price, University of Alaska- Fairbanks
Fire Island to Ellis Island	2008, 2010 2012	Joan Digby, Cris Gleicher, and James Clarke, LIU Post & LIU Brooklyn
Grand Canyon- Parashant	2008, 2009, 2010, 2011	Matt Nickerson and Todd Petersen, Southern Utah State University
Great Smoky	2011	Bill Atwill, University of North Carolina- Wilmington
Joshua Tree	2009	Matt Nickerson, hosted by Arizona State University
Olympic	2011, 2012	Aley Willis, University of Washington
Sequoia & King's Canyon	2012	Johnny MacLean, Southern Utah University
U. S. Virgin Islands	2012	Kathleen Nolan, St. Francis College Joan Digby, LIU Post
Zion	2008, 2009, 2010, 2011	Joy Ochs, Mt. Mercy College

Mini-PITP Excursions at NCHC Annual Conferences:

San Antonio Missions (2008)

Washington, D.C., Mall (2009)

Montezuma's Castle, Arizona (2011)

