

Exploring the High Plains: Biodiversity, Geology, and Cultural Heritage through an Interdisciplinary Experiential Learning Experience for Honors Students

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Partners in the Parks (PITP) is an outdoor experiential learning program coordinated by the National Collegiate Honors Council. PITP projects involve a partnership with any entity operated by the National Parks Service. These experiential excursions offer unique opportunities for collegiate honors students and faculty to visit areas of the American landscape noted for their beauty, significance and lasting value. Seven honors students from colleges, and universities around the nation participated in this one week excursion in June 2018. The following sites managed by the National Parks Service were visited: Niobrara Scenic River, Badlands National Park, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site, Mt. Rushmore National Memorial, Wind Cave National Park and Agate Fossil Beds National Monument. Students used photography and journaling to document their learning experience. The western High Plains is a unique region of mixed-grass, tall-grass, and sand hills prairie where six major ecosystems converge due to unique geology and geography, giving the region the name “biological crossroads.” Faculty and park personnel provided on-site informal discussions and informational sessions which included historical, scientific, cultural, and other important areas unique to a given park. This project also provided the participants an excellent opportunity for students to learn about the cultural heritage of Lakota Indians (a First Nation of North America) and how this heritage was influenced by the natural history and geology of the region as well as US governmental policies. An afternoon was spent at the Oglala Lakota College where faculty and staff served the students a traditional Lakota meal and gave short presentations on diverse topics such as medicinal plants used by the Lakota and a research project on growing mushrooms as a cash crop. The excursion also took advantage of exciting recreational opportunities in the parks to broaden participant's understanding of the overall value of national parks to our country and its citizens. This included hiking in the Badlands, participation in the Wild Cave Tour at Wind Cave and kayaking the Niobrara River.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, Honors field experience, experiential learning, Partners in the Parks, National Park Service, High Plains

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