

Journey of Self-Reliance and Environmental Stewardship: Lessons from Interdisciplinary Environmental Expeditions (IEE)

Imagine yourself 16 and alone with a 55lb pack on your back. You're on a trail climbing up a mountain, using a compass to reach a location you have never been. The rugged terrain and obstacles along the way make navigating even more difficult. The temperature hovers around 39 degrees Fahrenheit, and you're praying to reach base camp before dark, or worse before the snow falls. You feel alone, relying solely on the problem-solving skills you were taught in class and hoping that your instincts and self-confidence kick in when needed.

In traditional educational settings, it is sometimes hard to find impactful experiences that can forever shape your outlook on life. There is the standard route to education, and then there is the extraordinary route. In my junior year of high school, I had the opportunity to apply for and take a course called Interdisciplinary Environmental Expeditions (IEE). IEE is an integrated course in which the outdoors is our classroom. We studied everything between the Three Sisters Mountains and the Deschutes River. The intent of the class is to give students a sense of place in their community and stewardship. IEE is not just a class but rather a concept. A concept that by experiencing the world locally, we can learn to make a difference in our communities and in the world. It's impossible to adequately measure the influence this course had on me. Personal growth, a greater connection with nature, and an appreciation of minimalism and simplicity are three areas of my life that were profoundly shaped and molded by participating in IEE.

Backpacking into remote wilderness, using only a compass for navigation, and relying solely on the problem-solving skills I was taught in class requires self-reliance, planning, and decision-making. My IEE experience presented many opportunities to step out of my comfort zone and face uncertainties. Many times during the expedition I found myself alone with thoughts of doubt creeping into my head. It was also in these moments of solitude, that I found times for reflection and introspection, allowing me to gain perspective on life, set priorities, and discover inner strengths that I didn't know I had.

By experiencing the natural beauty of the Three Sisters Wilderness up close, I developed a greater understanding of the importance of environmental conservation and the importance of leaving no trace behind. Throughout our lessons, our IEE teachers emphasized the fragile ecosystems of our surroundings and helped us to understand the impact of human activities. I have been inspired to become an advocate for sustainable practices and contribute to protecting natural spaces.

IEE expeditions require you to carry all your essentials on your back. It doesn't take long for a 55lb pack to encourage a minimalist approach to life. My IEE experience fostered an appreciation for simplicity, teaching me to prioritize what is truly necessary and eliminate unnecessary material possessions. I am certain this mindset shift will extend beyond backpacking and positively influence all of my lifestyle choices.

My experience as an IEE student shaped and molded who I am today by teaching me that personal growth comes from stepping outside my comfort zone, the importance of protecting our natural surroundings, and that I can lead a happy and fulfilled life with only the basic necessities. I will never forget my IEE experience and the people that made it possible, my teachers at Sisters High School.