

# University of Toronto Outdoors: Engaging Immersive Experiential Learning

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DRAFT report submitted to Office of the Provost  
University of Toronto

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## **Summary**

This report provides evidence-based recommendations for the development of outdoor education programming at the University of Toronto. The report covers our research on place-based, land-based and adventure learning at other institutions, exploring administrative, financial, and intellectual bases for such programs; descriptions and assessment of our three pilot courses at U of T; and recommendations for administrators and instructors at U of T. Our research methodology includes a review of relevant literature, a survey of existing program websites and promotional materials, and extensive discussions with leaders of such programs. This report concludes with recommendations for expansion of the initiative, University of Toronto Outdoors.

## Glossary

**Culturally responsive pedagogy:** Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges the different ways of learning among the diversity of cultural identities and views these differences as student strengths.

**Experiential learning:** Experiential learning is the process of learning through reflection of experiences.

**Place-based education:** Place-based education is the approach to education whereby the context of learning is congruent with the content of learning. It engages project-based or “experiential” tasks to help students understand how historical, cultural, environmental, geographical and other aspects of place are interconnected, and how they impact learning.

**Regenerative sustainability:** Regenerative sustainability equally recognizes human and environmental wellbeing and their interconnectedness; it encompasses a cross-disciplinary or holistic framework that is rooted in an ethic of restoration as opposed to an ethic of harm reduction.

**Transformative learning theory:** The transformative learning theory supposes that experiences can lead to deep shifts in perspectives and can be transformational to the way an individual makes meaning, and can result in changed behaviours, thoughts and beliefs.

**Land education:** Land education inflects place-based learning models with decolonizing and indigenous perspectives on the land.

**Expeditionary learning:** Expeditionary learning is a broad term encompassing experiential, service-based, outdoor, and/or adventure education programs that combine intellectual and physical challenges. Although the phrase “expeditionary learning” may carry imperial or colonial baggage, research on expeditionary studies documents how the well-known benefits of experiential learning can be extended through pedagogical engagement with student travel, labour, and physical challenges.

**Integrated Learning Experiences (ILE):** Experiential learning opportunities for students that connect theoretical and practical learning while witnessing the implications of course content outside of the classroom setting.

## Background

This document summarizes research funded by a one-year LEAF grant for a project entitled “University of Toronto Outdoors (UTO): Engaging Place-Based and Expeditionary Learning.” The project aims to evaluate pedagogical benefits and administrative, logistical, and financial best practices associated with **immersive experiential education occurring outdoors**.

We proposed to evaluate the benefits and practicality at the University of immersive experiential programming outdoors through investigation into established practices and theoretical frameworks for place-based, land-placed, and/or expeditionary outdoor learning at other institutions. We have also run several pilot courses experimenting with adding outdoor modules to classroom-based courses.

In 2016, the President’s Three Priorities called upon the University community to:

- (1) “leverage our location,” integrating our practices more fully into our immediate natural, social, and economic location in the largest and most diverse city in the Great Lakes Region,
- (2) “deepen international partnerships,” and
- (3) “redefine undergraduate education,” in part by dramatically expanding and re-conceptualizing experiential education.

This project was aligned with each of these goals.

This report reviews outdoor programs in North America, exploring administrative, financial, and intellectual bases for such programs at the University level. The kind of experiential courses we are interested in typically involve class trips off campus, outdoors, often to remote settings. These courses can be expensive to run, difficult to schedule, confusing to grade, and complex to administer. Our research questions therefore included:

- How have other Universities funded such programs, scheduled them into a semester, and arranged course credits?
- What level of training should instructors have to teach in remote environments, and how should risk be managed?
- How can student performance on expeditions be assessed?
- How can diverse student needs be accommodated, and what structural and financial characteristics would a program need to ensure genuine accessibility?
- What level of cost can students be expected to bear, and how can the university ensure access for lower-income students while still guaranteeing the program’s sustainability?
- What are the guiding pedagogical principles of such programs?
- And finally, which financial, administrative, and intellectual models are best suited to our University?

The second part of this report describes three courses taught at the University of Toronto as pilots under the UTO immersive outdoor education rubric.

## **What is outdoor education?**

*“I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion” - Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound and United World Colleges*

In its simplest form, outdoor education is experiential learning that occurs outside. The field is considered to have emerged from the historical context of World War II, when Kurt Hahn, one of the field’s founders, saw learning from outdoor challenges as a way for young men to become more resilient in conditions of conflict and adversity. Still today, research shows that outdoor education can offer transformative learning experiences that prepare students to take on the challenges of their lives (Hill & Brown, 2014; D’Amato & Krasny, 2011; Walter, 2013; Winter & Cotton, 2012).

There is a large body of research on the practice of outdoor education. Some researchers distinguish adventure outdoor education from environmental outdoor education (Priest, 1986). Many argue that outdoor education situating students only in pristine remote places promotes an uncritical view of “nature” (Hill, 2013), making a strong case for outdoor learning in urban spaces. Some researchers have suggested that outdoor education programs should go beyond Hahn’s original focus on personal challenge to address collective challenges, including issues of sustainability, social justice, equity, community, and technology (Beames, Humberstone, and Allin 2017). Recent research argues for outdoor education programs that are accessible, sustainable, and place-responsive (Beames et al. 2017). Literature on adventure learning and outdoor education also continues to expand upon models for culturally competent leadership (Chang, Tucker, Norton, Gass, & Javorski, 2017).

### **Models of immersive outdoor learning**

Our research suggests that there are three types of outdoor experiential programming at the post-secondary (university and college) level, which we outline here. For the purpose of this report, we have categorized outdoor programming into a three-part taxonomy model: inherently immersive outdoor education, contextualized curriculum outdoor education, and explicitly extra-curricular outdoor education.

#### **Inherently immersive outdoor education**

Inherently immersive post-secondary programs are designed to fully immerse students in outdoor and experiential learning over extended periods. Inherently immersive programs run courses specializing in outdoor learning as part of a mandated curriculum that students must successfully complete to graduate. Graduates from these programs earn a degree specializing in outdoor experience, such as a Bachelor of Science in Expeditionary Studies (EXP) from SUNY-Plattsburgh. In this program, students pursue a major in Expeditionary Studies and learn about the history of exploration, environmental ethics and eco-justice, leadership, planning and risk management, as well as building specific skills in a chosen specialization: paddling, climbing or skiing. This program is intended to support students who wish to enter the outdoor industry as well as

expeditionary studies careers, such as working as a park ranger, expedition guide, in ecotourism, or adventure-based counselling. SUNY-Plattsburgh students begin the EXP program in first year with a foundational full year of six EXP courses as well as one General Education course. Once accepted into the program, students are automatically registered into their courses, and are sent their timetable as well as a list of required clothing and equipment from the university. In addition to their regularly scheduled courses, students also engage in topic-specific Activity Days including supervised hikes and three different week-long, off-campus trips (two water-based and one land-based).

Another example of an inherently immersive academic program in North America is the Honours Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation (HBOR) program at Lakehead University. This is seen as a unique program in Canada because students graduate with their four-year HBOR degree as well as a three-year Bachelor of Arts degree in History, Geography, Natural Science or Women's Studies. These students take core courses related to recreational pursuits in addition to advanced studies in parks, tourism and leadership. This advanced learning focuses on social and environmental awareness, leadership and management skills, critical thinking, risk assessment, nature-based activities and culturally diverse perspectives on the earth. In the cases of HBOR students who wish to concurrently pursue a teacher certification, instead of a three-year BA, students can graduate with a two-year Bachelor of Education in the Primary-Junior, Junior-Intermediate or Intermediate-Senior grade levels.

Other programs in outdoor education also include teacher certification, such as the Bachelor of Education in Outdoor & Experiential Education (OEE) from Queen's University. This 1.5-year program can be achieved concurrently or following an undergraduate degree. It combines conventional teacher certification with the acquired knowledge and ability to lead outdoor, nature-oriented activities for school and community-based programs. Queen's students in the OEE program complete 20 weeks of practicum, three of which are completed at an outdoor education facility.

Assessment methods within this type of program appear to focus on a combination of core competencies in skills and knowledge, individually demonstrated study and research (i.e., a thesis-based project), experiential learning (i.e., through working or volunteering in an outdoor setting and creating of a final-year comprehensive portfolio), and intra- and interpersonal competencies, learning about self and others through participation, initiative, and teamwork (i.e., through writing reflections on individual growth, collaborative group projects).

Other examples of inherently immersive outdoor programs include:

- the Bachelor of Physical Health Education (BPHE) in Outdoor Leadership at Laurentian University which focuses on guiding, and on facilitating learning within diverse environments, including remote locations. In this program, students can receive provincially or nationally recognized technical certifications in outdoor activities such as wilderness emergency first response training, rock climbing, canoe tripping, white water and sea kayaking.
- the Bachelor of Health and Physical Education (BHPE) specializing in Ecotourism and Outdoor Leadership at Mount Royal University. This four-year program prepares students for careers in health, fitness, sport and recreational sectors, as well as ecotourism and outdoor leadership, and further study in teaching, physiotherapy, medicine, chiropractic, pharmacy and dentistry

professional programs. This BHPE degree is comprised of nine required health and physical education courses, and 18 credits chosen from ecotourism and outdoor leadership course offerings in topics like Expedition, Ecology, Ecotourism Facilitation Skills, Sport Tourism, and a 52-hour practicum, as well as 12 General Education courses and 4 electives (for example, courses based on survival techniques, rock climbing, mountain biking and kayaking, etc.)

- the Bachelor of Science in Tourism, Recreation and Adventure Leadership at Oregon State University which has options to specialize in Adventure Leadership Education or Nature, Eco- and Adventure Tourism. This program studies the importance of tourism and recreation in natural environments to develop community initiatives, improve quality of life and human health, and to sustainability and responsibly use natural resources. In addition to courses, students complete an internship working for a company or agency in the field of tourism, recreation or adventure leadership.

Immersive outdoor education programs such as these require substantial appropriate levels of training for all instructors and student leaders. These programs also have highly developed risk management plans that are individualized for each outdoor context, as well as an institutionalized system of critical incident tracking. These are used to develop best practices, to assess instructor/staff performance, to improve program delivery, and to emphasize the importance of maintaining an ongoing practice of assessing and managing risk.

Some institutions situate outdoor skills and leadership training in an athletics department. Stanford University runs outdoor education courses within their Department of Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation, as part of their Health and Human Performance major. These courses begin with an “Introduction to Outdoor Education” (OUTDOOR101) which is described as exploring “the historical and philosophical foundations of Outdoor Education and how these concepts have influenced the development of programs at Stanford.” Another course in this program, “Sociocultural Dynamics of Adventure,” is described as

An examination of the historical, psychological, social, and philosophical foundations of adventure experiences in American culture, folklore, and landscape. Experience adventure in a variety of contexts.

Other courses in this program teach kayaking, SCUBA diving, or stand up paddleboarding, as well as adventure experience management, working with youth, or outdoor leadership. For example, there are courses on Outdoor Leadership Practicum in Backpacking (OUTDOOR300), Climbing Wall Experiences (OUTDOOR330), the Fundamentals of Leadership (OUTDOOR400), Outdoor Living Skills (OUTDOOR401), and Outdoor Living and Leadership (OUTDOOR 405). There are also interdisciplinary courses within the medical program that connect with safety and outdoors, such as CPR training (SURG110) and Wilderness First Aid (SURG224). In this immersive program, students are highly involved in outdoor education, receiving a degree in that field, within a curriculum that is designed to be distinct from other humanistic or scientific disciplinary curricula at the University.

## **Contextualized curriculum outdoor education**

Contextualized curriculum programs occupy a middle ground between being inherently immersive and explicitly extra-curricular. Assessment strategies shared between

inherently immersive and contextualized curriculum outdoor programs include the embracing of individually chosen, inquiry-driven research and learning, self-reflection practices, and willingness to participate in site-based experiences. In contextualized programs, however, outdoor teaching and learning occurs within courses that are housed within Arts & Science degree programs of whatever type. Institutions offering such courses may embrace and encourage outdoor learning that occurs within departmental curricula, but students are not able to pursue degrees focused on experiential or outdoor specializations. Our preliminary research suggests that in these programs, the pedagogical decision to emphasize outdoor experiential learning originates from individual instructors. Course outcomes, learning goals, assessment models, and curricular connections may therefore vary widely.

A good example of a well-developed contextualized curriculum program is the River Semester at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. Students spend a full summer semester traveling by canoe along the Mississippi River, taking several courses in history, ecology, and literature while traveling, and completing a summative individual research project as well, thus receiving a full semester's worth of course credits. Another Mississippi River course is taught at University of the Puget Sound. In this model, a course focused on "the river as both an historical and an imaginative site" is taught on campus in the spring, together with a .25-credit course on Expedition Management, in which students study "group development and functioning, feedback, leadership, followership, coordination, accountability, planning, communication, conflict and funding." These courses are followed by an immersive experiential learning course, described as follows:

"Adventure: Mississippi River" is an experiential learning program, offering students the opportunity to learn about the river and its history, engage the practice and proliferation of citizen science, study expedition management, participate in the adventure of rowing the length of the Mississippi, and earn internship experience through serving as shore crew here at Puget Sound during the river adventure. Two courses (CONN 358: The Mississippi River and BUS 303: Expedition Management) are required for students interested in joining the shore or river crews of the 2017 expedition.

Another example, with yet a different model, is Penn State's Adventure Literature program, with courses such as "The Beach: Exploring Literature of the Atlantic Shore," "Exploring Cape Cod," or "Exploring the Literature of American Wilderness." According to their program page, these courses

combine the study of literature with outdoor adventures that enhance a student's classroom experience. Adventure Literature students not only read Thoreau, but like him they travel to the mountains, the river, or the seashore, and they climb, hike, and kayak, and write about their experiences. These courses provide an opportunity to learn, have fun, have the experience of a lifetime, and get academic credit that will help satisfy degree requirements. (<http://english.la.psu.edu/undergraduate/adventure-literature>)

These programs tightly integrate outdoor learning with disciplinary objectives, combining Arts & Science curricular goals with the teaching of the transferrable and essential skills (such as paddling or climbing) required for place-responsive learning. Such courses emphasize the importance of learning about nature from nature, as well as in and through nature, and encourage environmental and sustainable stewardship (Palmer, 1998).

We were unable to assess the risk management plans for the programs above. However, it appears that most, if not all, outdoor programs at American institutions require students to complete a health assessment form, giving instructors necessary information about health conditions that must be taken into consideration as part of a risk management plan while traveling outdoors or abroad.

At the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM), the Experiential Education Office has developed a model where certain courses across campus have been designated as “experiential” (EXP). Such courses are mandatory in some students’ academic pathways, as in UTM’s Environmental Science program, for example, where students must take one EXP-elective. Currently, several UTM departments run courses that fit this designation. A review of course syllabi shows that outdoor experiences in such courses are conceptualized in various ways, and that the nature of outdoor experiential learning is diverse.

It appears that these UTM courses emphasize student understanding of outdoor experience as important to critical thinking generally and to course-specific disciplinary or cross-curricular learning goals. In this sense, this pedagogical approach is distinct from inherently immersive outdoor programs that target mastery of core competencies in specific outdoor skills or place-responsive content areas. In addition, although there are a few field courses in Environmental Science and Geology, it appears that UTM EXP courses exist mainly in the form of work internships and service learning, where learning occurs off campus but in an indoor urban environment. While off campus work and service experiences are of great value, they are very different experiences than those that occur “out of doors.”

When the use of outdoor learning is strongly integrated with disciplinary objectives and well articulated as such to students – as in the Mississippi River programs or the Adventure Literature program – outdoor experiential learning involves the development of transferrable skills and broad based competencies that are valued as integral to an academic pathway. By contrast, when outdoor learning experiences are hidden within unlinked courses across a faculty of Arts & Science, the specific skills and competencies that can be gained through outdoor learning may also be obscured.

### **Explicitly extra-curricular outdoor education**

Explicitly extra-curricular outdoor experiential programming occurs outside a degree program entirely. McMaster University’s Department of Athletics & Recreation, for example, offers a range of no-credit outdoor skills courses and workshops, including canoeing, climbing, and hiking classes and trips; canoe paddling and first aid certification courses are also available, as well as leadership and risk management workshops providing certification. Most institutions, including University of Toronto, mainly sponsor outdoor experiential learning opportunities in the form of clubs, i.e., student groups that gather for recreational activities such as rock climbing, cycling, canoeing, or orienteering. Because these experiences take place outside the curriculum, there is generally no connection made to disciplinary learning goals or methodologies, and assessment is not present, or at least not associated with academic performance.

Instead, extra-curricular outdoor programs focus on recreation, social cohesion, building community, leadership, participation, adventure-seeking, self-discovery, and exploration of tangible environments and intangible selves. Some established clubs plan trips and also provide outdoor equipment rentals, such as U of T's Outing Club (UTOC) and the Laurentian University Outdoor Club. Many outdoor groups are entirely student run, such as UTOC and the Outdoor Adventure Group at University of Calgary.

In another model, some post-secondary institutions offer optional outdoor experiences as orientation programs for incoming undergraduates. The Outdoor Action Program (OAP) at Princeton University began in 1973 as a Frosh Trip Program with a mission to

provide enriching educational and personal growth experiences through outdoor and adventure challenge activities to members of the Princeton University community and to urban youth in the Princeton area encouraging leadership development, skill development, and stewardship of the natural world.

Today, in addition to first year trips, the OAP also runs a variety of Outdoor Action activity trips, training programs and on-campus events over the academic year, from indoor climbing at their 14-station rock climbing wall, to hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking, cross-country skiing, community service and winter camping.

The Harvard First-Year Outdoor Program (FOP) is another example of a university with a designated outdoor education program for incoming students. The FOP at Harvard originated in 1979 based on the idea that

the wilderness is a unique learning environment that provides a setting in which incoming first-years can interact with one another, acquaint themselves with Harvard with the help of their leaders, and make a successful transition to college life. (<https://fop.fas.harvard.edu/>)

This extra-curricular program offers six-day wilderness trips in backpacking, canoeing and trail work, as well as site-based trips before the fall semester begins. In 2017 there were 43 trips made, accounting for roughly one quarter of the incoming freshman class.

Within Canada, the McMaster Outdoor Orientation Student Experience (MOOSE) is among the first programs of its kind to offer an outdoor orientation program. Led by staff and senior students, participants spend a week canoeing and camping at Algonquin Provincial Park. MOOSE's mission is

to provide incoming students with a mentored, outdoor experience for transitioning into university life while providing them with the tools necessary to build strong relationships and develop self-efficacy" and has also developed MOOSE Xchange (MOOSEx), which is an outdoor orientation program specifically for international students.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of such orientation programs on student success, especially for students from less-advantaged backgrounds (Bell & Starbuck, 2013). Extra-curricular outdoor programming is the most common type of outdoor experiential programming available to post-secondary students in North America. However, in this report we are proposing that many of the benefits of outdoor learning are lost when outdoor experiences are dissociated from the disciplinary curricular goals of students' academic pathways.

## **Challenges of teaching and learning outdoors**

### **How do outdoor experiences fit into a student's semesterized program?**

At many institutions, extended outdoor trips that are part of a student's curricular program are scheduled during a summer semester. University of the Puget Sound's Mississippi River course and the University of Toronto's Summer Abroad programs run through Woodsworth College are all conducted during the summer. Augsburg's Mississippi River Semester offers another model, with a full semester's roster of courses taught while students are traveling during an entire semester (not in the summer). Penn State's Adventure Literature program is yet another model, where trips associated with their courses take place primarily as long weekend trips. Some universities have a month-long January semester especially reserved for specialized intensive courses.

At U of T, some courses already utilize outdoor learning through the use of fieldwork, day trips, and wee-long trips during the semester reading week. Such courses offer a more accessible and affordable option to students who need employment during the summer months. Many of these courses could be modified to enhance their outdoor learning opportunities and increase the potential for experiential and transformative learning among students.

### **What training do instructors need?**

Research in outdoor education shows that successful outdoor experiential learning requires some level of challenge and risk. In programs held in remote environments, risks and challenges are "kept at a manageable level by the presence of a highly trained leader" (Druian et al., 1980). The reality of risk demonstrates a clear necessity for trained guides and leaders on educational expeditions. Wilderness First Aid or Wilderness First Responder training is a minimum requirement for program leads on outdoor trips (Bell & Starbuck, 2013). Additional qualifications vary and depend on place- and program-specific requirements for a trip. Professors and instructors at Algonquin College, for example, have the River Rescue Instructor certifications that are mandatory for white-water canoe and kayak expeditions.

Bell and Starbuck (2013) suggest that increasing programming costs are likely associated with the field becoming more professionalized, thereby requiring instructors to have more training. Programs for instructors such as wilderness medical training, risk management training, or mental health first aid workshops should be facilitated at the University level, rather than requiring individual faculty members to seek out this training. It is most cost efficient to run training workshops through a university's teaching and learning centre.

### **How are outdoor experiences financed?**

The financial cost of experiential education can be high. Most programs charge students a course fee that covers the cost of the outdoor experience. This model creates barriers for students with financial need, however. Some universities have recognized that to make

experiential programming truly accessible, it must be institutionally prioritized in the curriculum. Coker & Porter explain that “embedding [Experiential Learning Requirements] within the core curriculum is a necessary condition of creating total student access to experiential learning” (2015). They recommend that ELR-specific scholarships should be available to facilitate full participation. They also suggest targeted advising of scholarships about which students are often unaware. Outward Bound and NOLS provide and clearly advertise needs-based scholarships, for example, prioritizing opportunities for lower-income participants.

In another model, students at Laurentian University, required by their program to undertake a third-year expedition, spend a year doing extensive local fundraising to help subsidize the cost of this trip. Knowing in advance that they will incur these costs as a required part of their program enables them to plan ahead to raise needed funds.

### **Can outdoor programs be fully accessible?**

Yes. Students with disabilities can and should be able to participate in the full range of activities offered by a university. Unique solutions and strategies are required to ensure that outdoor education is accessible and equitable, and there are many adaptive technologies and forms of equipment that can facilitate participation. Appendix A provides a list of some specific conditions, with comments on what accommodations can allow for equitable participation. An outdoor education program should have a designated accessibility/equity staff person who is knowledgeable about the many viable options that are in use elsewhere.

### **How can outdoor programs be diverse?**

Planning an outdoor education program requires attention to accessibility, diversity and inclusion on various levels. Advertisements for field programs or adventure based education often focus on white, able-bodied and masculine persons (Hall, Healy, & Harrison, 2002). Outdoor programming must create equitable images that help all potential participants feel invited. Some students may not consider outdoor learning due to lack of exposure to wilderness, cultural values, or fear (Wu, 2007). The value of “pushing your limits” often encouraged by North American adventure programming may conflict with cultural priorities of self-defined limits or valuing one’s abilities (Chang et al., 2017). Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model (Hofstede, 2001) or Project Adventure’s GRABBS model (Schoel & Maizell, 2002) can be used to guide the development and facilitation of outdoor education programming with awareness of cultural context and difference.

## **U of T Outdoors (UTO) pilot courses**

Founded in 2016, the UTO initiative has designed adventurous programs for place-responsive learning in local and global contexts. The courses discussed in this proposal are part of the Department for the Study of Religion's suite of Integrated Learning Experiences, in which students develop competencies relevant to their discipline alongside other transferable and essential skills (see Appendix A on page 30).

In addition to addressing disciplinary concerns, the three courses described here focus on developing competencies such as leadership, mastery and autonomy, and social and environmental responsibility. These are taught through outdoor learning modules that are strongly integrated with disciplinary outcomes; they are therefore examples of contextualized curriculum outdoor education, as discussed above. Course design has been influenced by research demonstrating how student learning is enhanced when it is centered around principles of "authenticity, agency, uncertainty and mastery" (Beames and Brown). The design of these outdoor experiences is also influenced by research on place-responsive learning and regenerative sustainability, which emphasize pedagogical frameworks that use observable connections between humans and the environment to help students develop an ethical orientation to their surroundings.

These courses have experimented with different forms of experiential outdoor education. The immersive international travel of "Himalayan Borderlands" is contrasted with local travel in "Wild Waters" and urban travel in "On Foot." These courses also vary widely in terms of logistical challenges and risk factors, differing in skill development for both instructors and students, and in course size. Course design has been influenced by concerns relevant to risks associated with high altitude trekking, traveling far from medical care, learning and teaching in the woods or on water, and coping with weather extremes and cultural difference.

In "On Foot" and "Wild Waters," students engaged with the outdoor environment of Toronto & Ontario, learning to navigate physical and intellectual challenges, and participating in place-responsive embodied practices. Both were multi-disciplinary courses in which students developed competencies in religious studies and environmental and urban histories. In addition to these disciplinary objectives, the outdoor modules aimed to help students develop transferrable skills such as:

- leadership and teamwork
- self-awareness, mastery and autonomy through outdoor challenge
- confidence in the ability to navigate through uncertainty
- knowledge of and empathy for local peoples and landscapes
- enhanced sense of social and environmental responsibility
- risk assessment and management

In "Himalayan Borderlands," students developed a similar set of skills within a multi-disciplinary context, but in a global setting with high levels of challenge and risk and a more intensely immersive program.

The following sections will summarize each of these courses, provide selected examples of student feedback, and conclude with an evaluative summary of all three pilot courses.

### **CRR199H “On Foot: Cultural Histories of Walking” (Fall 2017)**

This first-year seminar explored how historical, cultural, and spatial contexts shape practices of walking. It examined representations of walking in history, religion, and philosophy, and investigated connections between walking, thinking, and writing. Students learned about knowing place and landscape through movement, religious and secular pilgrimage, walking tours, and political and social uses of walking.

Coursework combined required reading and writing with walking outside, and students were required to maintain a walking journal throughout the semester. Students went on several historical walking tours around Toronto, and they participated in experiential workshops on Buddhist contemplative walking, labyrinth walking, Feldenkrais postural movement, and journaling about walking.

Student feedback indicates that the outdoor component of the course helped them gain an appreciation of their local environment, empathy for others’ less fortunate circumstances, personal sense of wellbeing, a tool for self-care and stress management, increased self-awareness, and enthusiasm for school.

#### **Student feedback (see Appendix B for more)**

“I have also gained in a simplistic sense, a much greater appreciation for the world surrounding me. Not just the small town of Mississauga and Toronto that I live in, although I have learned much more than I could have ever imagined about these as well, but also an appreciation for the entirety of the planet.”

“It’s deeply saddening to see the conditions we let others endure because of our selfishness and refusal to act. When looking at those in need, look into their eyes. Replace their space with that of yours or a loved one and imagine the internal complexity of their situation. These people are our family too.”

“This walk, in fact these collections of walks, contains all that makes me happy; alive. I will continue to walk throughout the next semester – even in snow! And throughout the rest of my life.”

“I didn’t realize how such a simple movement can play a large role in the way we feel. I am amazed to think how much this class has changed or developed the way I think.”

“I wish I could major in walking.”

### **RLG239H “Wild Waters” (Fall 2017)**

This seminar focused on rivers as sites of cultural contact, religious experience, and natural destruction. It investigated the power of rivers to nourish whole cultures, reshape landscapes, and devastate the peoples who depend on them. The course examined the cultures of rivers through historical, literary, anthropological and experiential exploration. The role of sensory and material knowledge and place-responsive learning was highlighted in an immersive outdoor module.

“Encountering the Madawaska” involved a three-day trip to the Madawaska River, a small tributary of the Ottawa River and an established teaching route for river canoeing. We worked with Paddler Co-op of Palmer Rapids, ON to create a three-day program that combined basic canoe paddling instruction, a short river canoe trip, and a historical and environmental curriculum. This program took place over Thanksgiving long weekend. The class camped on-site and rented all necessary equipment. Prior to the trip, students completed readings on the region’s geography, ecology and history, which they discussed in detail at the campsite one evening. Students also completed a detailed risk assessment assignment prior to the trip.

In this course students gained transferable skills of group camping preparation and management, canoe paddling, reading whitewater rapids, and Leave No Trace camping practice. They also practiced reflective writing that linked experiences of place to disciplinary knowledge, and methods of assessing and managing risk. Student feedback indicates that the outdoor module helped them feel an increased sense of mastery, an awareness of environmental responsibility, and an understanding of how different pedagogical methods affect their own learning.

**Student feedback (see Appendix B for more)**

“Paddling away from the last rapid, I felt an immense sense of achievement and clarity after facing and overcoming the white water. In a way it felt like I was looking at the landscape around us for the first time – the reds and yellows of the changing leaves mirrored on the surface of the river, the bruised autumn sunshine. As I took off my helmet, a monarch butterfly flew around my face and just past my head, a dove of peace announcing the recession of the floodwaters. Up until that moment I had interpreted my sense of achievement as a feeling of dominion over nature, like I had taken it on and triumphed over it. I suddenly felt that this was not the site of domination but of deep communion. I hadn’t conquered the river; I had traversed it.”

“Being able to experience the power and presence that a river [can have] first-hand was hugely beneficial to providing a deeper understanding of the material we are studying in class. However, I think that this form of education goes beyond just hands-on learning. I think it has the power to remake the student.”

“I am now asking myself questions of the responsibility I take as a bearer of this knowledge, and how it can come into play in my urban life. How do I reconcile my experience with the more traditional styles of learning that I am taking part in? How does this more intimate appreciation of the river form guide my learning?”

**Pre- and post-trip survey within RLG239H “Wild Waters”**

In order to assess the effect of the canoe trip in this course might have, students were invited to complete an online survey prior to going on the trip and after they returned from the trip. The pre-trip survey collected baseline information in two key areas for all 14 students in the course. First, we looked at students’ relationship to the course: we asked why they enrolled, what they wanted to get from it, what expectations they had for it, as well as what they would rate their existing knowledge of the curriculum topics, their canoeing skill level, and the degree to which they were experiencing a variety of emotions in response to anticipating the trip. Second, we looked at students’ relationships with their local natural environment. We asked them to describe their local environment,

and how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements related to being environmentally inclined (i.e., enjoy spending time outdoors) as well as being environmentally aware (environmental literacy). The post-trip survey had a lower response rate but provided some valuable comparison data. The post-survey touched on the same questions as the pre-trip, but also asked students for their overall satisfaction and biggest take away from the trip.

Pre-trip survey responses for the first area suggested that students mainly enrolled in the course because they had an interest in learning outdoors (*“I love the outdoors”*; *“I was always interested in outdoors and learning about how rivers shape our world”*; *“A desire to seek a more comfortable relationship with nature”*; *“I wanted to learn more about the Canadian landscape!”*). Some students also felt drawn to the religious studies component of the course (*“I felt it well combined two of my most passionate interests – religion and environment”*; *“An interest in learning about the history of rivers and feeling a spiritual connection to Canadian rivers and environment”*). Others expressed a connection between the outdoor learning offered in the course and their mental health, emotions and wellbeing (*“I love the outdoors and need to get away at times to calm down and reconnect”*; *“I needed to get out of my comfort zone and this really pushes it”*) as well as their academic wishes (*“I wanted to take a course that I felt was different”*). Many cited the physical aspects of the trip as a prime reason for why they signed up, as one student so passionately wrote: *“The bomb-ass canoeing trip! A reason (although we shouldn’t really need a reason) to be outdoors in Ontario!”*

Sharing what they wanted to get out of this course, many students stated they hoped to gain *“experience in outdoor activities”*. The majority also wanted to learn more about water and rivers (*“I would like to know why rivers matter in today’s world and learn more deeply on how most of us are dependent on rivers for energy and other resources”*; *“A knowledge of the river to use on my future trips”*; *“A better understanding of the way the water on our planet works and how to interact with nature in a more positive way”*). Others were looking to connect with nature (*“Have a deeper connection to the Canadian environment”*; *“The opportunity to gain a more intimate understanding of Canadian landscapes and how they are tied to identity”*; *“A better sense of outdoor connection and a renewed appreciation for this province”*). Two students stated that they would like *“a change of pace from an average class setting”* and *“the possibility to learn doing alternative activities that can be done in a regular classroom”*, which highlighted these students’ desire for more outdoor learning opportunities in an academic environment. In the post-trip survey, 100% of the respondents reported that they achieved what they wanted to get out of the trip. One student wrote:

I think I did! I wanted to gain a better understanding of nature and get more in tune with it, and that’s exactly what happened. I’ve been up to my cottage many, many times but never really paid attention to the geology or agriculture of the area around it, but this trip really helped contribute to my understanding of it and it has really helped to shape my outlook of how cool our country is and the knowledge behind every river, rock and experience!

In regards to expectations for the course, students had a variety of responses. Some focused on the process of learning in the course by expecting to *“experiencing learning in a more dynamic outdoor context”* and having the opportunity *“to experiment with*

interactive learning, and improve my ethic when it comes to group work”. Many stated they expected to learn more about rapids and rivers, while others expected more specifically to be have their perspective widened by this course (“*I expect to feel enlightened about Canadian rivers and more connected to the land*”; “*I hope to actually reorient my viewpoint towards nature and rivers in general*”). One student anticipated they would begin to triumph over their fear of rapids (“*overcoming fear of fast moving water*”) while another expected “*to have an adventure*”. Just under half of all respondents expected to “*form a community*” with their classmates (“*I hope to bond closely with my fellow classmates*”; “*to connect with people who have the same interests as myself*”). In the post-trip survey, 75% of respondents indicated their expectations were met, though two “*anticipated there would be more of an academic element,*” which is helpful feedback for incorporating more curriculum connections. Overall, on a scale of 0 – 100 with 0 being completely dissatisfied, 50 being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 100 being completely satisfied, students’ responses rated the trip an 80.5%, falling into the satisfied range.

On the pre-trip survey, the majority of students’ responses indicated a “basic understanding” of the curriculum topics (rivers, canoeing, local environment) prior to the trip. Post-trip responses indicated a greater understanding of each topic, as seen in the examples below:

Rivers are always changing and are all interconnected. Water plays a great role in shaping cultures and communities, with the ability to bring them together but also to destroy them with effects of erosion or floods, etc.

A lot more goes into it than just getting into a canoe and floating down a river... it takes a lot of physical motivation and strength, as well as knowledge of rivers work and what obstacles to look out for and avoid.

Historical and cultural significance of the Madawaska. Places have more than just physical significance.

Over seventy percent of respondents indicated they had “no prior experience” with canoeing, while three students reported they had a “beginner level” and one student reported possessing an “advanced level” of experience. Following the trip, 50% of students reported a “beginner level”, while 37.5% felt they now had “intermediate level” of experience and one remained as having an “advanced level”.

In regards to emotions felt prior to the trip, 93% of students reported feeling “excitement”, 86% also reported feeling “open-minded”, and 71% indicated they were “happy” and feeling “interest”. While only one student reported feeling “distress” and “apprehension”, 62% of students indicated they were feeling “nervousness” to a moderate degree. Post-trip responses indicated the majority of students while on the trip felt happy, excited, open-minded, enthusiastic, interested, and most felt confident. Nervousness decreased for most students on the trip as compared to pre-trip nervousness, though one felt nervousness very strongly and also reported feeling very strong feelings of distress. One student who expressed a strong fear of drowning prior to this trip felt her biggest take-away from the experience was her new ability to read rivers, and this helped her manage her fear, as described below:

How to read rivers! It was a really great experience and I personally am someone that is afraid of water (like deep water, fast-moving water – I have a fear of drowning) but after this experience it helped to alleviate some of that stress and now I'm definitely going to partake in white-water canoeing sometime again in the future.

The second key area of students' relationships with nature had them describe their local environment, and this had a range of answers: some respondents described "*the streets of Toronto*" and green spaces with the University of Toronto, while others mentioned forests by their house in their hometown. Prior to the trip, the large majority of students fell within the range of being "slightly" inclined to "strongly" inclined to gravitate towards the outdoors as only one student disagreed with all statements associated with enjoying the outside world. It is interesting to note that 100% of students indicated that taking a walk in nature when stressed helped them to unwind, 93% strongly agreed they felt most at ease in nature, and half of all students strongly agreed that learning outdoors helped them with understanding ideas and concepts.

As for environmental literacy, 92% of students responded that they try to take care of their local environment, and the majority felt their daily actions had a significant impact on the environment, however fewer students felt very aware of many issues affecting the environment. Post-trip results for environmental inclination were similarly high, as they were in the pre-trip survey, but markers indicating environmental literacy slightly increased, suggesting a slight positive impact on improving students' environmental understanding, as this student's words express:

This trip helped me to feel more in tune with nature. I got to not only learn more about the way water flows through our country and its effect on the surrounding environment, but also got to actually go in the water and become a part of that water flow and learned that there's a lot more to rivers than just liquid flowing down a creek. In terms of my local environment, I wish there were more rivers and nature aspects. There are plenty of forests and parks around, as well as a lake, but none of it really compares to the way it is up north. It also makes me think about what happened in the city to get rid of all of the rivers... on a map you can see that rivers are everywhere, but there is an absence of them in the city. I know that my grandmothers house used to back onto the Garrison Creek, which is a river that salmon and many other aquatic creatures would flow through, but they drained all the water out of it and covered it up. It makes me wonder why (especially after exposing myself to rivers physically). I think this trip sparked an interest in my knowledge of rivers in our local environment, or lack thereof.

Overall, data from these pre- and post-trip surveys of the white-water canoe experience of the "Wild Waters" course suggest that students are experiencing transformed ways of thinking about their own abilities as well as their perspectives on their local world: "*This has completely changed the way I view the outer Toronto area. I never saw this area as something that could hold and support such a natural world.*"

### **RLG401H "Himalayan Borderlands" (Spring 2017)**

Offered in 2016 (for no credit, with eight students) and 2017 (for credit, with four students), this was a month-long immersive field course in India that focused on Buddhist pilgrimage travel, the influence of rivers on Himalayan cultures, and the interplay between religious institutions and environmental sustainability movements in the region. The group was together around the clock for the entire trip, traveling to a new site every

few days and spending many hours outside on foot most days. Cultural, dietary, interpersonal, physical, emotional, and environmental challenges were encountered daily, sometimes causing considerable stress. This course also involved an eight-day trek to a high altitude mountain pass, which most students found highly demanding physically and emotionally, and which involved a moderately high level of risk.

In addition to disciplinary studies (reading, writing assignments, interviews and discussions), students gained practical skills in field research methods, risk management, interpersonal communication, multicultural literacy, and physically demanding travel and living in a non-urban international setting. Student feedback indicates that participation in this course increased their understanding of and empathy for global communities, greatly increased their self-understanding and self-awareness, and promoted a substantially increased sense of autonomy and mastery.

#### **Student feedback**

“Perhaps the greatest lesson of all came from my professors who showed me that I am a lot stronger than I thought”

“As I sat in the monastery overlooking the Himalayan mountains I felt the most at peace I have felt in years. I did not need to prove myself to anyone.”

“The physical challenge was necessary to have an expansive learning experience. It forced us to come out of our comfort zones and ordinary routines.”

“I learned a lot about different people and belief systems, but I learned most about myself.”

More student reactions to this course have been published online at

- <http://sikkim.hackinghistory.ca/> on the 2016 trip
- <http://outdoors.hackinghistory.ca/>
- <http://news.artsci.utoronto.ca/all-news/himalaya-buddhism-environmental-issues/>

#### **Additional reflections on these courses**

As described above, student feedback makes it clear that the immersive outdoor modules in these courses provided many benefits that are not easily achieved inside a classroom, and many transferrable skills that can only be achieved in an outdoor setting. Below, we will consider how these courses meet broader U of T priorities. But first, we will make a few additional comments on our experiences with training and risk management, financing these courses, and issues of diversity and accessibility.

#### **Instructor training and risk management**

The three pilot courses were taught by Frances Garrett and Matt Price. In preparation for their first “Himalayan Borderlands” trip, Garrett and Price undertook a Wilderness Medicine Institute Wilderness First Responder certification course; skills learned in this course proved essential on both students trips to India. Garrett and Price have also completed the NOLS Risk Management Training program; this program, which specializes in risk assessment and management in outdoor settings, also has provided

essential elements of training for the management of moderate to high risk outdoor programs. Their biographies below (see page 27) summarize the competencies that supported their leadership of these outdoor programs, including both life experiences and formal certifications in programs such as Mental Health First Aid, Whitewater Rescue Technician, and Tandem Canoe Whitewater.

In addition to taking responsibility for their own training, specialized guides and training assistants were also relied on for the higher risk outdoor components of “Wild Waters” and “Himalayan Borderlands.” In India, a local guide and support team accompanied our group while trekking at high altitude. On the “Wild Waters” Madawaska River trip, a certified whitewater guide was responsible for all training, the course instructor, Matt Price, was also certified in whitewater rescue, and a graduate student assistant with paddling certifications also accompanied the group on this trip. Use of these guides and assistants was a mandatory part of our risk management plan.

In “Himalayan Borderlands” and “Wild Waters,” Garrett and Price carefully assessed, logged and tracked what they observed of student health and behaviour (as relevant to ongoing risk assessment and management), and they maintained detailed critical incident records throughout each course. None of this documentation was required by the University, nor was any critical incident reporting requested upon our return.

The University of Toronto’s risk assessment and management forms and practices are dangerously inadequate for the context of teaching in an outdoor or international setting. The University neither provides nor requires training for instructors teaching outdoors – no training in any type of first aid, and no training in risk assessment or management appropriate to the context of teaching. The University offers no system for critical incident management, reporting, or tracking. Most hazardously, the University prevents instructors from requesting health information from students, which puts the entire group in considerable danger when traveling far away from medical care.

Any implementation of outdoor programming must be associated with appropriate levels of instructor training and support.

### **Financing outdoor components in pilot courses**

These three UTO pilot courses were offered to students at minimal to no cost, using funds gathered from ATLAS, DIIF, the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Frances Garrett’s own research accounts.

- The outdoor components of “On Foot” cost \$1000; this was paid out of Garrett’s faculty research funds. This was \$76/student total. No course fees were charged to students.
- “Wild Waters” cost roughly \$3,800, paid for by funds from ATLAS. This comes to just under \$350/student. No course fees were charged to students.
- “Himalayan Borderlands” cost between \$25,000 and \$30,000 each year. (In the first year, two students were independently funded by grants they received on their own.) This comes to roughly \$4500-5000/person (including two instructors), which makes the cost of this month-long program roughly comparable to Woodsworth summer programs abroad. However, while students are responsible for all costs for Woodsworth programs, students were asked to pay only a maximum of \$300 for incidentals to participate in this program. “Himalayan Borderlands” was paid for by a

combination of funds raised from DIIF, the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Garrett's own research funds.

Raising funds from a variety of sources is time-consuming for instructors and not viable programmatically in the long term. In addition, because we typically do not receive funding until shortly before a course begins, this means that students cannot engage in fundraising – as Laurentian students do, to fund the expeditions required in their program – nor can they coordinate the effort to apply for scholarships to support their own costs. While we are grateful for the support from the DIIF or ATLAS programs, relying on them (as they are run now, on a year-to-year basis) to fund these courses means that other possibilities for student support are difficult to organize. If such courses were institutionalized programmatically, students and the program team could more easily regularize the process of fundraising and applying for scholarships; students could also plan their own finances to support course fees.

### **Diversity and accessibility**

The UTO pilot courses were advertised widely through departmental mailing lists and social media (Facebook and Twitter), which directed students to the UTO website (<https://outdoors.hackinghistory.ca/>). Our advertising imagery shows student groups that are gender balanced, but predominantly white and able-bodied. We have not yet been able to attract a more diverse cohort. (A pending grant application to the CRF addresses this problem specifically.)

Although we have not yet had any participants requiring mobility aids or other assistive technologies or anyone with major medical needs, “Himalayan Borderlands” has had several students with mental health challenges and moderate mobility impairments. This is one reason why the presence of two instructors, and sometimes a third local guide, has been absolutely mandatory on these trips, as a single student needing additional support has at times required the full attention of a single instructor.

## **How outdoor learning meets U of T priorities**

It should be clear that the three UTO pilot courses easily meet the President's Three Priorities: with “On Foot” and “Wild Waters” we are leveraging our location by integrating teaching into the streets and waters of our local region; with “Himalayan Borderlands” running two consecutive years, we are deepening partnerships with our host institutions and communities in India; and with UTO overall we are redefining undergraduate education by taking experiential education into city streets, white-water rapids, and high altitude mountain passes.

As our pilot courses suggest, programming in outdoor education has the potential to address a number of the University's recently articulated priorities. Many of the priorities addressed in the five University statements and reports below are directly addressed by research on the benefits of outdoor education programming. Below, we summarize some of this research, and how it addresses the University's concerns, in several key categories.

### **University statements and reports**

1. In 2016, the President's Three Priorities called upon the University community to (1) "leverage our location," integrating our practices more fully into our immediate natural, social, and economic location in the largest and most diverse city in the Great Lakes Region; (2) "deepen international partnerships"; and (3) "redefine undergraduate education," in part by dramatically expanding and re-conceptualizing experiential education.
2. The June 2017 report, "Rethinking Higher Education Curricula: Increasing Impact Through Experiential, Work-Integrated, and Community-engaged Learning, A White Paper for the University of Toronto" promoted the development of Integrated Learning Experiences (ILE).
3. The University's 2017 Report from the Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability prioritizes curricula that focus on climate-change themes and sustainability-related teaching; this Report recommends the development of a curricular "sustainability pathway."
4. The U of T's 2016-17 AODA & ODA Accessibility Plan identifies the importance of fostering accessible learning environments and accessible course design. In the area of mental health and well-being, this report also articulates the importance of programming that "helps students learn skills that foster growth by systematically identifying academic and character strengths, while learning effective stress management, improve academic performance and boost overall well-being."
5. The November 2017 Report of the Study Group on Global Education, "Global Education for Canadians: Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home & Abroad," emphasizes the need to shift approaches to global education, identifying in particular the values of self-awareness, risk management, cultural competency, openness and inclusion.

### **Diversity & cultural competency**

The University of Toronto is a leading global institution with students from 168 countries and regions around the world. Such global outreach necessitates a culturally responsive pedagogy that views the diversity of cultural identity as student strengths. Culturally competent leadership is a vibrant area of research in the fields of adventure learning and outdoor education (Chang et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that student learning is enhanced when learning opportunities are centred around principles of "authenticity, agency, uncertainty and mastery" (Beames and Brown, 2016), qualities that are inherent to most outdoor learning experiences. This research points to the success of those programs that demand self-sufficient living, physically demanding work, and sustained close contact within a diverse group, where students are isolated from their typical environments and often outdoors. Such programs focus on development of self-awareness, risk assessment and management, and cultural competency, as well as encouraging the growth of values of openness and equity. These are the very competencies identified as critical (and yet underdeveloped) for Canadian students in the

2017 report, “Global Education for Canadians.” They are also some of the competencies targeted by the UTO pilot courses described above.

### **Skills for a global future, accessible to all**

The 2017 report, “Global Education for Canadians,” also urges a “meaningful investment to ensure that Canadians students study abroad,” sounding “an urgent warning that we are not preparing young Canadians to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.” Many outdoor education courses specifically promote outcomes involving skills deemed to be of significance for 2020, including complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, service orientation, negotiation, and cognitive flexibility (World Economic Forum, 2016). Research by Easton and Gilburn (2013), demonstrates quantitative evidence to suggest that courses involving outdoor fieldwork can improve cognitive learning and increase attainment in students. “Global Education for Canadians” cites research demonstrating that the benefits of international education are most significant for students from less-advantaged backgrounds. The report suggests that global education programs, which can be exemplars of experiential learning, must therefore be designed to be

accessible to groups that require the greatest support, and who stand to benefit the most, such as Indigenous Canadians, students from less affluent households, students who are the first in their families to enroll in post-secondary education, underrepresented minorities in the educational system, and people with disabilities.

Bell writes that “in seeking to expand a theoretical analysis of experience as socially produced for our students... we must make spaces to invite and explore different representations of experience.” (Bell, 1993). Experiential learning programs that incorporate students with a wide breadth of varied interests “provide greater opportunity for growth in empathy with others possessing different values.” (Druian et al., 1980).

### **Student wellness**

The U of T’s 2016-17 AODA Plan recognizes the need to support student mental health and to support training for staff and faculty. A large body of research demonstrates the benefit of outdoor programs to student wellness. In a study by Muts & Muller (2016), for example, fifteen undergraduates travelled to the Norwegian Hardangervidda region where they spent eight days in the wilderness as part of a summer course. The course focused on how to “survive” in nature and on knowledge of regional flora and fauna. All participants reported improvement in the areas of perceived stress, self-efficacy, mindfulness, happiness, and life satisfaction after the trip, establishing significantly greater improvements in these areas compared to a control group of peers who did not attend the excursion.

Mental health benefits from outdoor adventure programs for young adults include positive changes to self-concept and self-esteem (Boeger, Dorfler, & Schut-Ansteeg, 2006; Fengler & Schwarzer, 2008; Schell, Cotton, & Luxmoore, 2012), cognitive autonomy (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014), reduced absence from school (Ang et al., 2014),

increased group cohesion (Greffrath, Meyer, Strydom, & Ellis, 2013), and prejudice reduction (Wright & Tolan, 2009). Programs that reinforce values of openness and inclusion are central to the recommendations of the 2017 report, “Global Education for Canadians.” At a time of rising intolerance globally, this is especially important. Research suggests, moreover, that spending extended time outdoors enhances higher-order learning by connecting cognitive and affective domains (Lugg, 2007).

### **Commitment to environmental stewardship & sustainability**

Sustainability is a broad term that may be articulated through economic, social, and ecological pillars (Sumner, 2005). The University’s 2017 Report from the Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability promotes the notion of regenerative sustainability. Regenerative sustainability recognizes the interconnectedness of human and environmental wellbeing. It encompasses a cross-disciplinary or holistic framework that is rooted in an ethic of restoration, as opposed to an ethic of harm reduction (Robinson & Cole, 2015). The Report from the Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability proposes the development of a “sustainability pathway” for U of T students; this would identify and programmatically organize courses that focus on climate-change and sustainability-related teaching. We suggest that the UTO curricular pathway described in Appendix A is a model of, or could be a component of, such as sustainability pathway.

Sustainability education requires an interdisciplinary approach with a structure that is holistic, collaborative, and experiential. The content of sustainability education should be congruent with the context and process of learning. Outdoor education has been shown to be a natural vehicle for sustainability education, and it can naturally enhance ecological literacy (Lugg, 2007; Alagona & Simon, 2010). Contextualizing outdoor experiences with disciplinary coursework – as in the contextualized curriculum models described above – greatly enhances students’ critical appreciation of those experiences, and this multimodal learning approach also fosters students’ capacity for environmental stewardship (Hanna 1995).

### **Transformative learning and critical awareness of (de)colonization**

Transformative learning is based in critical theories and place-based pedagogies that connect educational content with context (Lange, 2013). Place-based education engages project-based or experiential tasks to help students understand how historical, cultural, environmental, geographical and other aspects of place are interconnected, and how they impact learning. Land-based education inflects place-based learning models with decolonizing and Indigenous perspectives on the land. Land- and place-based pedagogies may also create spaces for Indigenous ways of knowing (Martinez et al., 2008). Place-based activities have been found to have the ability to raise cultural awareness of the Land (Styres, Haog-Brown & Blimkie, 2013). In this way, land-based practices can encourage students and teachers towards an educational journey that raises awareness of the importance of decolonization and reconciliation through upholding the Indigenous perspective that Land is our first teacher (Styres, 2011).

The Mission of U of T states that the University has a duty to uphold the “human right to radical, critical teaching.” Gruenewald (2003) argues that place-based pedagogies are radical, as they emerge from attributes of place that are inherently multidisciplinary and experiential, rather than from experiences rooted in a philosophy of “learn to earn.” Outdoor education, as a form of critical place-based pedagogy oriented squarely toward sustainability and equity issues, has potential to enable transformative learning and to deeply shift perspectives towards decolonization in particular (Gruenewald, 2003). This may offer spaces of healing for relationships with Indigenous Peoples of Canada and of the land (Martinez et al., 2008).

## **Recommendations**

1. We should establish a network of U of T educators designing and executing course content that brings students into sustained, immersive contact with natural environments. This network would build a foundation of like-minded and outdoor-oriented faculty and students who are passionate about outdoor experiential learning. Faculty who have expressed interest during our preliminary research phase include Barbara Murck, Donald Cole, Ken Derry, Bonnie McElhinney and Teresa Kramarz.
2. With this support of this network, we should advertise courses featuring outdoor learning so students can find them and plan for them. We should work toward developing an institutionalized curricular pathway for outdoor learning courses, such as an EXP or UTO course designation, in order to clarify and expose the benefits of our contextualized curriculum outdoor programs. To build on this pathway, we could work toward developing a UTO minor program.
3. We should reach out to groups on campus who might not typically be drawn to outdoor education to be sure that our program planning and implementation is equitable and accessible to all.
4. We should provide pedagogical and logistical workshops for faculty interested in teaching outdoors.
5. The University should provide adequate training for instructors teaching outdoors, including first aid, risk management, and specialized skills as required for a given teaching context. The University should also log and track critical incident reports in order to assess risk and improve programming.
6. Instructors leading trips away from medical treatment centres must be allowed to collect health information from student participants.
7. The University should organize funding opportunities for outdoor teaching and learning in a way that allows students to seek additional scholarships and fundraise for course fees. An integrated funding plan for outdoor education opportunities will help these programs grow and be available to larger numbers of students.

8. As outdoor programs expand, the University should develop partnerships with external organizations such as Outward Bound Canada, Paddler Co-op, NOLS, or Operation Groundswell, to assist program delivery.
9. At the graduate level, we could facilitate the creation and coordination of a collaborative specialization in conjunction with appropriate graduate programs.

## Report Authors

### Faculty team

FRANCES GARRETT has taught Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in the DSR since 2003, and was the DSR's Associate Chair from 2011-2017. She was a Northrop Frye Award winner in 2012, has been a Jackman Humanities Institute Faculty Fellow, and has been PI for four completed SSHRC research grants. Her work with online teaching has been funded by the MTCU provincial Shared Online Course fund and an Online Undergraduate Course Initiatives Award. Garrett's research and teaching focuses on Tibetan Buddhism and its relations with other forms of culture. She has also worked on Central Asian epic literature, and is now beginning a project focused on contemporary and historical stories about Himalayan mountains. She has lived for many years in various parts of India, Tibet, and China. Frances has Wilderness First Responder, Mental Health First Aid, NOLS Risk Management, Paddle Canada and Norges Padleforbund certifications, and enjoys climbing rock and ice.

MATT PRICE is recent recipient of the Kathleen O'Connell Teaching Excellence Award. Price is a historian of science and technology with extensive experience with engaged teaching and learning, including community service, public history, and embodied learning. His interest in digital technology emerged partly out of his research and partly from his practical engagement teaching technical skills in schools and social housing. He has held academic appointments at Harvard, Cornell and the Max Planck Institute and has taught at U of T since 2001; he has also served as Consultant to the Mozilla Foundation on open-access educational programs. On behalf of the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, he received the 2017 J. Franklin Jameson Archival Advocacy Award from the Society of American Archivists. An experienced backpacker, paddler, and mountaineer, Matt has current WMI Wilderness First Responder, NOLS Risk Management, Whitewater Rescue Technician, and Tandem Canoe Whitewater certifications.

Since 2011, GARRETT and PRICE have jointly been awarded an ATLAS, a LEAF, two DIIFs, and ITIF, a TLKY Teaching Fund award, and a Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario research contract, totaling well over \$100,000 in all. They are co-authors (with Stian Haklev) of the 2015 report, "If You Build It, Will They Come? An Evaluation of Whiteboard, a Networked Academic Profiles Project," published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Research Publications. In 2016 and 2017 they co-led undergraduate trips to the Himalayan state of Sikkim, India. They are the co-founders of UTO.

### Student team

LAURA BURNETT is completing a Masters of Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto. She received a Bachelors of Science degree in Kinesiology from the University of Waterloo. As an occupational therapy student she is interested in how a person's environment can affect their well-being and shape their occupational engagement. Her passion for nature and outdoor adventure has led her to explore ways in which we can

create inclusive outdoor experiences for individuals of all abilities. Laura is a Paddle Canada certified SUP Basic Instructor and had completed the Paddle Canada Level 1 sea kayak skill course. She enjoys paddleboard yoga, mountain views, and food cooked over a campfire.

ALYSSE KENNEDY is a nature-loving doctoral student at the University of Toronto (OISE) pursuing a PhD in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development. Having worked with diverse students ranging from toddlers to the post-graduate level, she's passionate about getting people of all ages out and about exploring their local neighbourhood. In her work with OISE's Environmental and Sustainability Education Initiative, she has been able to promote just that, through organizing workshops and conferences dedicated to getting students outdoors more often. Her graduate work examines the relationships between environmental and sustainability education and Indigenous place-based education. Her goal is to implement meaningful pedagogical approaches to teaching about the environment in accessible and relevant ways. Alysse received a Master of Teaching and her Honours Bachelor of Science in Psychology both from U of T. She loves animals, books, travelling, yoga and going on hiking adventures with her dog.

LAILA STRAZDS is a graduate student at the University of Toronto in the Adult Education and Community Development program with a collaborative specialization in Environmental Studies. She received her Honours Bachelor of Science in Psychology and has a keen interest in researching the psychological motivators for pro-environmental behaviours. It was through experiences such as international exchanges to Germany and Australia and working with the City of Toronto in municipal politics that she realized the importance of experiential and community engaged learning. Laila is an accredited flat-water canoeing instructor with the Ontario Recreational Canoeing and Kayaking Association. Some of her favourite activities include hiking, rock climbing, and painting natural landscapes.

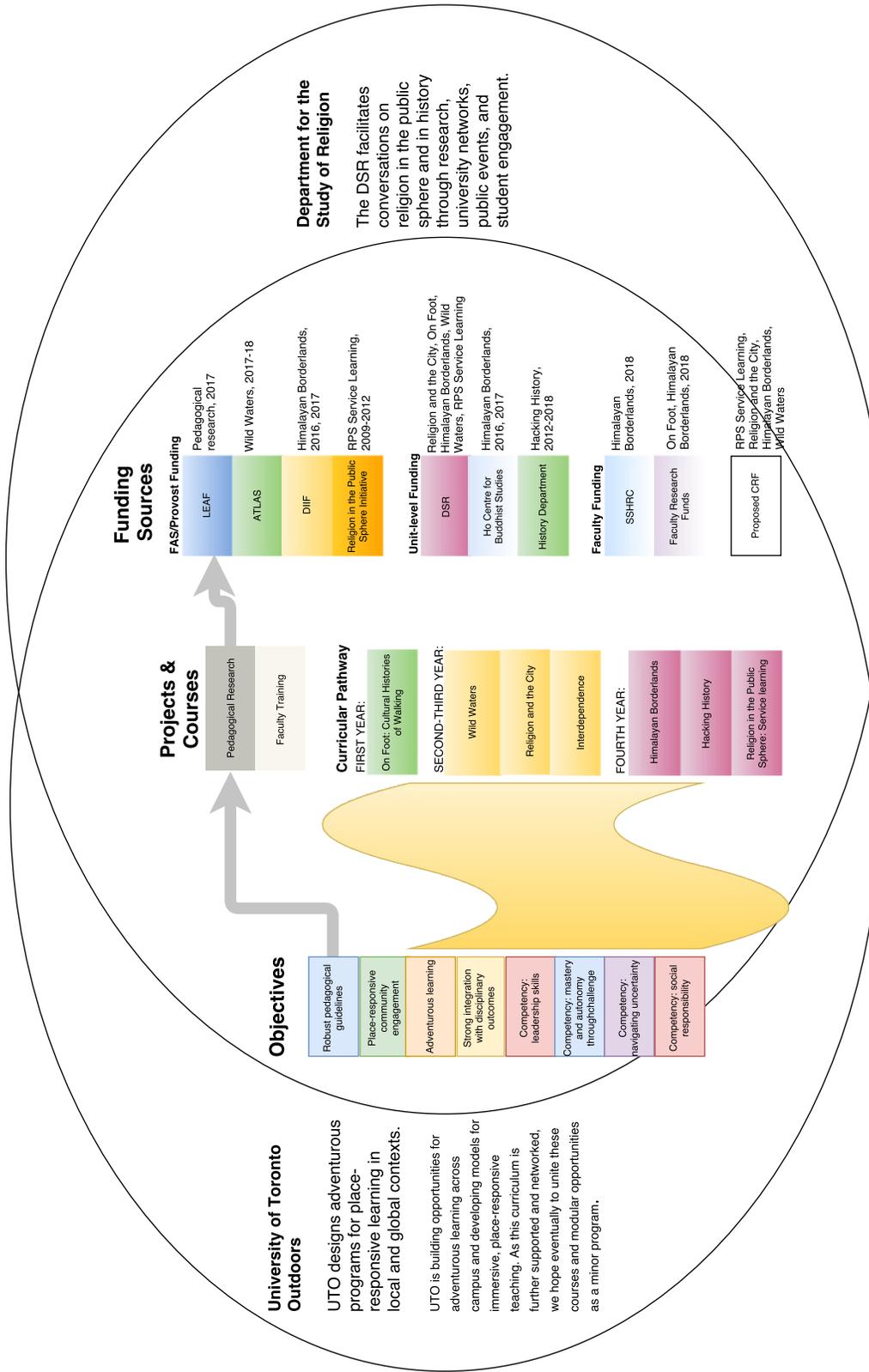
SALINA SURI is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto completing her degree with a specialization in History. She is extremely excited to be involved with University of Toronto Outdoors. She has been passionate about outdoor experiential learning since the first Adventurous Journey she completed for the Duke of Edinburgh Award. Since then, she's worked as a swim instructor and lifeguard with children from varying abilities and situations; from inner city refugees to a summer camp in Algonquin Park. In addition to her involvement with UTO, she was recently in India conducting research for an independent project at U of T on pre-union organization in garment factories in Bangalore. She loves doing almost every sport that involves water (including Brigantine sailing and dragon boating), and leads outdoor trips as an Executive Member of the U of T Duke of Edinburgh Award club.

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**Appendix A: UTO Curricular Pathway**

## **Appendix B: Accessibility Recommendations**

As with all courses at UofT, it is important to provide detailed information about the trip in the course advertisement and include an accommodation statement recognizing that students with diverse learning styles and physical abilities or other health considerations are welcome. It is especially important to encourage students to approach the professor or trip leader as soon as possible with any concerns or accommodation requests to allow for preparation before the trip begins. Accommodations can vary greatly depending on the individual, therefore a discussion with the student(s) directly can be the most useful in determine how to best accommodate their needs.

### **Type 1 Diabetes**

A student with Type 1 Diabetes on a canoe trip, for example, may have difficulty controlling their glucose levels during periods of physical exercise or irregular meal times. Preparing for this trip with an emergency sugar supply, a hygienic storage and disposal plan for syringes, and activity scheduled with hydration and snack breaks can help make this type of trip safer and more accessible for the student.

### **Epilepsy**

Epileptic episodes can be triggered by excessive tiredness, lack of sleep, irregular meals (hypoglaecemia), increased stress, heat or humidity, irregular schedules (resulting in missed medication), and emotions such as anger, worry or fear. All of these triggers may be present in an outdoor learning environment and can be addressed by designating a recovery time and place when on site, creating a buddy system, ensuring medications are taken prior to activity, considering safety of locations such as near the edge of a cliff, and understanding individual triggers.

### **Asthma**

A student with asthma who may be engaged in physical activity at a higher intensity than they are accustomed to when kayaking or canoeing for example may not have immediate access to medication or an inhaler. Similar to preparing for any other physical activity, medication should be administered prior to activity and a proper warm up should be provided. Understanding of the student's activity tolerance and developing a signal for when they do not feel well and need assistance should be part of trip planning. Fluids consumed at cold temperatures can sometimes trigger asthma symptoms therefore drinks should be kept at room temperature which can be achieved through insulated water bottles.

### **Visual Impairment**

For student who are visually impaired the common emphasis on the visual over other senses or other ways of knowing during outdoor learning experiences can be addressed by creating a more multi-sensory approach which may involve exploration of the sounds,

smells, tastes and touch characteristics of different environments. Other strategies include verbalization of strokes, commands, surrounding scenery, or environment, pairing with a sighted person over difficult terrain, and stringing ropes to different areas around camp. In a survey response of a UK fieldwork course where students had visual impairments, instructors reported the following accommodations that were made: Taped material and enlarged photocopies of diagrams, student pairings with others who understood their limitations and could assist with escorting them across difficult terrain (Hall & Healy, 2004).

### **Hearing Impairment**

Barriers to outdoor learning experiences for students with a hearing impairment include a lack of available amplification systems, increased background noise, and decreased visibility. Having lanterns at night so speakers can be seen when communicating orally, using a circle when meeting in groups, and making auditory cues or instructions visible (e.g., flashing a light or waving a flag) are strategies to make trips safer and more accessible for these students. Teaching can be adapted by using visual aids or demonstration during instruction and having a pen and paper available for communication.

### **Mental Health**

An unfamiliar environment away from usual social and professional support along with challenging physical and social/group tasks can be barriers to individuals with mental health. Involving the individual(s) in goal setting, knowing their strengths and limitations, and setting frequent milestones or achievements are general ways to assist in supporting the mental health of participants. Many of these mental health challenges can also affect cognitive function, therefore writing things down to assist with memory, minimizing distractions, modifying activities to match competency level, encouraging mastery, and using smaller groups can be strategies to accommodate these cognitive changes.

### **Mobility Impairment**

Mobility impairments can be varied and often require individualized adaptations to allow for full participation. Beyond the physical inaccessibility of some outdoor spaces or environments, increased physical strain, transportation, and inclement weather can be a barrier for student with mobility impairments. Consulting with the student regarding their individual needs is the most effective strategy in determining what accommodations are needed. Accommodations can include scheduled washroom breaks, a portable commode on site, support persons, or arranging for accessible sleeping accommodations. In a survey of UK fieldwork courses, instructors of one fieldwork course reported two students with wheelchairs attended and student helpers were used, their own accessible vehicles were used to travel to the site, accessible accommodation centres were chosen that could house the group, and some routes were altered to allow for full participation. In addition to these adaptations, mobility impairments may require equipment or other physical resources for the student(s). Below is a list of equipment and resources available in Ontario that can be used to acquire equipment or help guide adaptations for individual needs during outdoor programming.

## **Adaptive Equipment and Resources**

### **Trail Rider:**

[http://www.bcmos.org/main/trailrider\\_north\\_america.php](http://www.bcmos.org/main/trailrider_north_america.php)

The TrailRider is a one-wheeled adapted wheelchair for individuals with mobility impairments. This device requires two “Sherpas”, one in front and one behind. It is frequently used for navigating more difficult or inaccessible terrain, including many mountain hikes. Trail Riders are available for rental or loan through the “Take a Hike” initiative introduced by the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation in BC.

### **Tetra Society of North America:**

<http://www.tetrasociety.org/>

The Tetra Society is a group of volunteer engineers who design and construct customized assistive devices for people with specific needs that cannot be met by commercial products. Devices are created for the cost of materials only. A catalogue of devices created in the past can be found on their website. Examples of past projects and devices created that assist in outdoor recreation include custom climbing hand splints used by a quadriplegic rock climber, adaptive dragon boat seating, kayak and kayak paddle adaptations for individuals with upper body mobility impairments, and a multi-use sit-ski plus sit-ski adaptations.

### **Para-nordic Committee:**

<http://www.ccski.com/Para-Nordic/Para-Nordic-Contacts.aspx>

The Para-nordic Committee provides rentals of cross country sit-skis in Ontario for \$150 for the season or sit-ski loans on an as needed basis for the cost of shipping. They also provide free sit-ski training camp days/try-it events in Ontario. Contact information for the Ontario representative can be found on their site, which is the first point of contact for any questions regarding rentals or training events.

### **Community Recreational Initiatives Society (CRIS):**

<http://adaptiveadventures.ca/>

CRIS is a non-profit organization that uses adaptive equipment to enable individuals of all abilities to interact with the great outdoors. Although not yet available for rent in Ontario, this organization provides examples of adaptive equipment used in a variety of settings. Adaptive equipment they have used includes tandem recumbent bikes, sit skis, sleighs for travel when snowshoeing, outriggers for kayaks, seating adaptations, and wheelchair accessories.

## Appendix C: Examples of Student Work

### Student assignment from RLG239 “Wild Waters”

#### “Reflecting on our Encounter with the Madawaska”

For many people throughout history, rivers have functioned as borders – between peoples, states, and countries, but also as a divide between different worlds, life and death, then and now. The waters of rivers are saturated with symbolic significance of remaking and rebirth, with many religious texts and oral traditions recounting total renewal through a great flood. Just as the problem of unstable river changing over time forces us to recontextualize the relationship between politics and nature, perhaps we can recontextualize river mythology, and read ideas of antediluvial and postdiluvial worlds into our own experience as a way to rekindle an ancient appreciation of and mystification with rivers. In what ways are we remade through intimate contact with nature? Do the violent waters of a river still have the power to reconstitute us – in ways beyond the physical?

Paddling away from the last rapid, I felt an immense sense of achievement and clarity after facing and overcoming the white water. In a way it felt like I was looking at the landscape around us for the first time – the reds and yellows of the changing leaves mirrored on the surface of the river, the bruised autumn sunshine. As I took off my helmet, a monarch butterfly flew around my face and just past my head, a dove of peace announcing the recession of the floodwaters. Up until that moment I had interpreted my sense of achievement as a feeling of dominion over nature, like I had taken it on and triumphed over it. I suddenly felt that this was not the site of domination but of deep communion. I hadn't conquered the river; I had traversed it. The river didn't care if I had lived or died, if I had fallen out of my canoe or successfully steered my way through the wave trains, but still somehow it felt as though it had granted me permission to pass, allowed me to live. I was brought back to the brief moments of plunging down through the rapids, which were not instances of feeling victorious but rather a sort of blankness, a disappearance of my subjective self as I just tried to stay above water.

Something that I was hoping to engage with going into this trip was the substance of the sublime in a Canadian context. An experience of the sublime is often spoken of as a suspension of the motions of the soul, a moment of self-shattering that destabilizes the subject. The concept of self-shattering implies a consequent remaking of the self, and it's compelling to consider how we may be changed in the process. This perhaps sounds grandiloquent, but I think it speaks to the significance outdoor education holds. I was very interested going in to the trip to experience learning in an alternative environment. My education has taken place more or less exclusively within four walls, and I wasn't sure what the pedagogical aspect of the trip might be or what I would take away from it. It was definitely an experience that enhanced and contextualized the material we were studying in class. It mirrored something I experience often as an art history student, wherein seeing a piece of art in real life allows a clarity of understanding that seeing reproductions cannot. Being able to experience the power and presence that a river first-

hand was hugely beneficial to providing a deeper understanding of the material we are studying in class. However, I think that this form of education goes beyond just hands-on learning. I think it has the power to remake the student. In this particular circumstance, the postdiluvial subject has been remade by a sublime encounter with the river, taking away a new understanding of it after being subjected to its force. My own personal reaction was a personification of the river of an entity with which I had forged a sort of relationship, a reaction that speaks back to a long tradition of peoples bestowing a human agency and essence upon natural forces. After the flood, the student is not just provided with context for their studies, but carries with them a new knowledge, appreciation, and intimate relationship with the river.

I am now asking myself questions of the responsibility I take as a bearer of this knowledge, and how it can come into play in my urban life. How do I reconcile my experience with the more traditional styles of learning that I am taking part in? How does this more intimate appreciation of the river form guide my learning? These are questions I look forward to exploring in the second half of our semester together.

### **From CCR199H “On Foot: Cultural Histories of Walking”**

#### **Excerpts from students’ Walking Journals**

Student A: “If I didn’t have this walk scheduled in I probably would have only gone outside to go to my lectures. Having some time set aside to go on a walk has been very valuable to me. I think it is important to have time reserved to be outdoors with your own thoughts. Things can get pretty overwhelming at times, so having personal, active time gives an outlet, and walking is so meditative and reflective by nature that it clears the mind and helps me refocus my priorities. It’s like I can reset my mind. I always feel like I have more of a handle on my personal and academic lives and how they fit together. I plan on continuing to schedule in long walks outside throughout my time in university. I’m sure that having this ritual will be good for me as a form of reflection. When I think about ways to reflect, I’ve never thought about walking. However it’s starting to see to me like the most effective form of reflection. When I try and write about my thoughts or feelings I tend to overthink and question my own feelings, but that doesn’t happen when I walk..... Whatever is on my mind I can think about more clearly and with less judgment while I’m walking.”

Student B: “Walking is easy but not simple. It connects with everything we do and tells others who we are.”

Student C: “When signing up for this course I had no clue what to expect, I essentially chose it because it was a seminar that worked best with my schedule. However I am so grateful now having gone through it, as it has politely forced me to continue to go on walks for pleasure throughout this stressful time of starting university. I do believe that had I not take this course, ... that really would have taken a toll on both my mental and physical health. Especially since before analyzing my walking habits as I have done

through this course, I never really realized how much significance and importance walking has had on my life.... Along with this I have also gained in a simplistic sense, a much greater appreciation for the world surrounding me. Not just the small town of Mississauga and Toronto that I live in, although I have learned much more than I could have ever imagined about these as well, but also an appreciation for the entirety of the planet.”

Student D: “It’s deeply saddening to see the conditions we let others endure because of our selfishness and refusal to act. When looking at those in need, look into their eyes. Replace their space with that of yours or a loved one and imagine the internal complexity of their situation. These people are our family too.”

Student D: “The places the requirements of this class have pushed/motivated me to go have profoundly influenced my beginning university experience in an immeasurably positive way. The teachings of our readings have permanently effected my perception on the act and opening up the doors to the endless literature to learn more about walking, and I hope to continue growing in my knowledge of it, enrich my experience and allow it to shape my thoughts and writing.”

Student E: “This walk, in fact these collections of walks, contains all that makes me happy; alive. I will continue to walk throughout the next semester – even in snow! And throughout the rest of my life. Maybe I’ll even journal the odd elucidating (or maybe even the mundane... everything has significance) walk now or then. Thank you... for a truly wonderful, thought-provoking, engaging course.”

Student F: “This class has made me take into consideration all aspects of walking as I live through new experiences. I didn’t realize how such a simple movement can play a large role in the way we feel. I am amazed to think how much this class has changed or developed the way I think. .... As I talk to people back home about my university experience, I find myself talking a lot about this course. I am so glad I signed up for this class.”

Student F: “As I walked down Spadina today I thought of how one could only walk in order to experience the sensory details that I was experiencing – the smell of Asian food coming from the shops, the sound of the streetcar and the people talking to each other and to their mobile devices as they walked by.”

Student F: “I wish I could major in walking. I love talking to others about the class and what I’ve learned and the material is actually quite fascinating! If you asked me in August when I was choosing my courses, I don’t think I would have ever expected this outcome.

Student F: “As this semester comes to an end, all I can think is how much I wish this was a full-year course.”