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## The National Park An Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Course

California State University Channel Islands (CI) is located within view of two National Park Service units – Channel Islands National Park and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Opened in 2001, CI is the newest California State University campus. It was recently designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. This designation, combined with its expanding relationship with the Park Service (including multiple research projects and educational activities and recent membership in the CESU) positions the campus to engage a the university student demographic with parks in new ways.

CI offers students the opportunity to participate in a series of unique interdisciplinary upper division courses focused on mission based institutions as part of its upper division general education curriculum. These courses examine public institutions, such as Libraries, Museums, Parks, Universities, and Zoos from the perspective of multiple disciplines. Each of these courses is offered in partnership with the institution and includes project based learning that actively engages students in addressing real issues facing the institution. These courses are team-taught, have civic engagement components, and include active participation by representatives of the partner institutions in delivery of course material.

The National Park course was first offered in spring 2010. It is cross-listed under both Environmental Science & Resource Management (ESRM) and Political Science. Students enrolled in the course receive general education credit and come from a wide range of majors. Although it contains elements of each of the following, the class is not a history, interpretation, policy or resource course but an examination of the institution and its various aspects, functions and challenges. Examination of opportunities, challenges and contradictions associated with carrying out the NPS mission is a central theme of the course. For some students the course represents their first visit to a National Park. Students are expected to complete a civic engagement project as a component of the course.



## Creating a University – Park Learning Community

The National Park course grew out of a series of cooperative projects between CI faculty and Channel Islands National Park. Although the course proposal was authored by campus faculty, the superintendent at Channel Islands National Park collaborated with CI faculty in planning the first offering of the course.

Once the course was underway, staff from both Channel Islands and Santa Monica Mountains took a major role in delivering portions of the course content to students. Park staff made a number of in-class presentations, provided practical perspectives on the concepts discussed in the course, and facilitated field experiences for students.

## Engaging Students with Parks

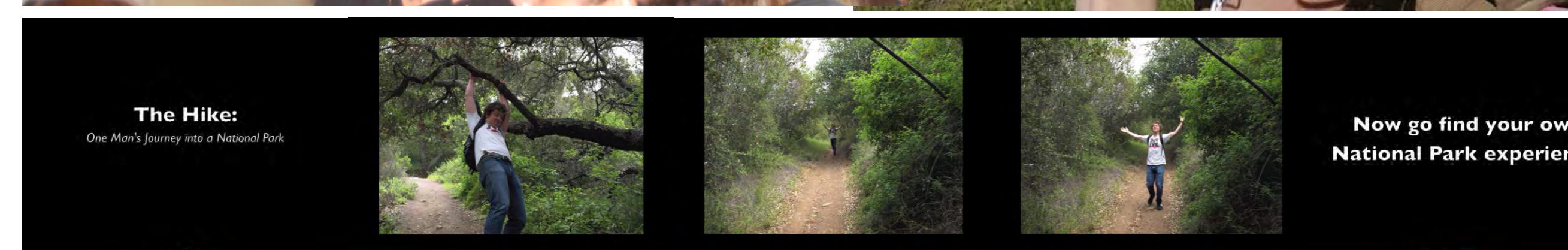
Although visits to national parks remain high overall, the system faces a major challenge in attracting and engaging college age visitors. Declining interest among this important demographic presents a long term challenge for those concerned with conserving natural resources and those managing parks in particular.

In addition to more traditional course outcomes, students in this course were given an assignment to create a final group project designed to engage their peers in one or more aspects of the national park experience and attract them to visit a national park.

Student projects from this class were presented to science students at nearby Oxnard College, a nearby community college designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Examples of student projects include the following:

- You tube videos
- Facebook page
- Blog about park
- Guides written for specific subgroups
- Posters about park experiences

Although the quality and sophistication of these projects was variable, the process of preparing and presenting them, combined with the reaction of the student audience, confirmed the value of this activity. A student-to-student approach added a relevance that allowed participants to relate to messages about parks in ways that appears to resonate more strongly with those of college age than some traditional approaches used to attract visitors and communicate information about national parks.



## Lessons Learned

If Parks are genuinely interested in responding to the call for civic engagement (Director's Order #75A, 2007), then there must be a dynamic conversation with the public that reinforces public commitment to the preservation of heritage resources and strengthens public understanding of the full meaning and cultural relevance of these resources. The process of learning about civic engagement is iterative. As practitioners with the NPS and partner organizations have come to understand the benefits of interacting with communities in a deeper, more meaningful way has evolved a more deliberate and sustained approach to building relationships.

The University is an ideal place to build and sustain these relationships with the surrounding community. Encouraging students to engage in peer to peer interactions regarding the relevance of National Parks is a far more powerful voice that parks can use to advance public lands stewardship. Engaging the community **WITH** and **THROUGH** the University adds a unique dimension to the Park Service commitment to civic engagement.

The involvement of Park staff and University faculty as co-planners and instructors in the course is critical for success. Establishing course outcomes and learning objectives that are mutually agreed upon insures cohesiveness in the course delivery and consistency in meeting park and university goals. Students requested more direct involvement with the Park asking that "on the ground" projects be incorporated into the curriculum. This creates another avenue for engagement and perhaps a deeper commitment from those students that "learn by doing". While these applied projects are required in more traditional field studies, perhaps a hybrid version of this approach might fit well in an interdisciplinary course like this.

## Future Directions

Creating a **Park-University Learning Community** has been a focus for CSU Channel Islands since the University opened in 2002. The intentional nature of this partnership has been articulated in many ways (shared NPS space on campus, grants, student research, etc.), but none have been as powerful as The National Park class in articulating this shared commitment. The mutual vision for the course as a vehicle for meeting both park and university goals will continue to evolve and the hope is that these unique course offerings will contribute to "branding" this new institution as environmentally conscious and dedicated to the concept of public land stewardship.

Faculty have been approached by the New York Times to develop an on line version of the course to be distributed nationally through their educational network. This new course would serve the broader national audience and create new avenues for civic engagement throughout the country as participants would be required to "connect" with their local NPS unit in meaningful ways.



## Acknowledgements

The National Park course would not have been possible without the active involvement and contribution of park personnel. The contributors from Channel Islands National Park included: Russell Galipeau, Yvonne Menard, Kate Faulkner, Mike Morales, Ann Huston, Denise Domian, and Karl Bachman. From Santa Monica National Recreation Area the following individuals contributed to the course: Woody Smeck, Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Seth Riley, and Cristy Brigham. In addition, Gary Davis generously volunteered share his experience with students in the class. In addition to photos and images created by the authors and students, the photo of a student with a clinometer is @Ventura County Star 2010.