

USU STARS GEAR UP Provides Outdoor Learning Opportunity for University Students Across Utah

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GEAR UP students participate in outdoor learning during their San Juan River trip.

Eighteen GEAR UP students who are enrolled in universities across Utah recently completed a 57-mile, multi-day rafting trip as part of a hands-on education experience.

The event was a collaborative effort between USU STARS GEAR UP, a federally funded grant program at USU that works with schools in low-income areas to provide college and career readiness and support, and staff and faculty from Southern Utah University who oversaw the outdoor education.

The group kayaked the lower San Juan River, two hours south of Moab, in late May. The river trip was designed to provide rich outdoor education and personal growth for the students.

“This hands-on learning experience on the San Juan River integrates STEM, history and culture,” said Aryn Dotterer, USU STARS GEAR UP executive director. “Studies show that being immersed in nature is beneficial for the mind and the body as it improves physical health, mental health and cognitive functioning. It is also a wonderful opportunity for our students to build connections with faculty and peers.”

Staff members from SUU Outdoors began by reviewing river safety and rescue protocols. One guide reminded students, “A calm mind is best in outdoor recreation.”

Launching from the river entrance, students paddled in pairs in bright red inflatable kayaks. After a few hours of rowing, SUU Outdoors Assistant Director Levi Pendleton signaled for the group to set up camp. Evening activities included catching lizards and toads with biology professor Dillon Monroe and a hands-on geology lesson taught by geology professor Casey Webb, who built a replica of the San Juan River in the sand and explained how it formed over millions of years.

Students appreciated the opportunity to ask questions in the moment.

“We live in science. It’s so cool being able to have somebody talk to us about it while we’re living in it,” said Emma Glover, a Snow College graduate.

That night, students laid out their sleeping pads and settled into their tents, many for the first time. Edward Tierrablanca, an incoming second-year student at Utah Valley University, reflected on the new experience.

“I’ve never gone camping before, so it was an eye-opening experience to learn from the professors, especially since it was my first time,” he said.

Despite a night of minimal sleep, spirits were high the next day. The group took a break from paddling to hike the challenging Honaker Trail, which gains 1,000 feet in elevation in about 2 miles.

Following dinner that evening, the staff hosted a “career night” where they shared their career journeys. All four SUU Outdoors staff members completed SUU’s outdoor recreation program for their undergraduate degree and credited that degree for enabling them to find meaningful work in their field.

“It was inspiring to see their love for the outdoors bringing them to SUU because it’s so close to what they love,” said Michie Pham, a Utah State University incoming second-year student.

Amy Lund, a USU GEAR UP college adviser in Southern Utah, started working as a peer mentor while attending Brigham Young University–Idaho. She believes that experience helped her land a previous role in Snow College admissions.

“It was an enriching experience then, and I get to do it full-time now,” Amy said.

Kyle Lund, a USU GEAR UP college adviser in Southern Utah, advised the students to participate in more opportunities like this trip.

“Almost 6,000 students had the opportunity to experience this trip, and 18 of you took it,” Kyle said.

Some career night speakers compared elements of the river to a career path, emphasizing potential twists, turns and obstacles. Sometimes, the path isn’t always upward; it’s about pivoting, they said. Students appreciated hearing that most college and career paths aren’t linear.

“Getting a lot of different perspectives on how journeys change and how there are so many different opportunities at different places was amazing because I feel like it lessens the burden and stress of having to worry about having your life planned out,” said Lillyanna Garcia, a SLCC incoming second-year student.

The third day of the trip was a favorite for many students because they rowed through three challenging rapids — Government, Twin Canyons and Ross Rapids.

After the group pulled into their final campsite, Monroe found a dead bat, which provided a perfect opportunity for biology professor John Taylor to incorporate the bat in his evening’s lecture. Taylor taught students how bats can change their heart rate on a whim to conserve energy. He also shared how he gently places bats in his pocket for them to rest after examining them during research.

Students listened for bat calls using Taylor’s bat detection device and night vision goggles. Later, Monroe helped students spot glowing scorpions.

“We saw a couple of baby ones and one by our tent,” Tierrablanca said. “They were glowing in the dark,” he said.

On the final day, the group took a short walk and saw the stunning red rock of Oljato Wash. A few hours later, after encountering a few shallow sandy spots, an “eddy out” signal brought the group to Clay Hills Crossing, the final pull out.

Overall, students enjoyed the event and expressed gratitude for the time they spent away from everyday life connecting with nature and each other.

“I loved knowing that the world still carries on beyond everything on my phone,” said Priya Corley, a Utah State University incoming second-year student.

USU STARS GEAR UP plans to offer similar trips with other cohorts, continuing its efforts to create hands-on experiences for students that connect education, exploration and career discovery. Visit the USU STARS GEAR UP [website](#) to learn more about the program.