

George Spencer
Alpha Sigma '16
Summer Enrichment Final Report

My Summer- Teaching (and learning) in the Tetons



Arrival Day in the Jackson Hole airport.

This summer was an incredible learning experience for me. Initially, I would like to express my immense gratitude to the Alpha Sigma Foundation for their generosity in making this summer possible. It has been a privilege to be a part of such a supportive Alpha within the national organization of Chi Psi. I am confident that, looking back, I will be reflectively proud of my time as an active brother and remain grateful for the opportunities that Alpha Sigma has provided me, including this grant that made my summer a reality.

While this summer was sufficiently exhausting, it was one of the most impactful learning experiences of my life. Even though it was my second summer with the same company, my time with Wilderness Adventures this year was filled with new and challenging situations and opportunities that led to a life-changing three months in Wyoming. I began my summer with WA in Jackson Hole with close to 80 other trip leaders, participating in an extensive two-week training program to prepare us for the logistical and situational decision making we would be faced with in the coming months. This training process is by far one of the most tangibly rewarding processes of working with WA. Initially, this manifested itself in the extensive backcountry skills training I received, which honed my ability to execute and teach important techniques for outdoor living. Furthermore, the soft skills training that the company emphasizes was comprehensive in providing me the ability to create an open and welcoming community for my groups. The other aspect of training that stuck out most to me was the immediate community that exists amongst the staff members. Upon our arrival in Salt Lake City, the WA family is formed and lasts not just through the summer, but beyond. It is a support system, a network, and something to lean on in times of confusion or need. In many ways, the bonds created here were similar to the bonds of brotherhood fostered at Alpha Sigma.

After training had concluded, it was time for the staff to receive their groups. The previous summer, this meant I flew to Central America to prepare for my students. However, this summer I stayed right in Jackson and anxiously awaited my first group- 13 middle schoolers. If being with middle schoolers for 3 weeks doesn't sound challenging to you, then I can say from experience you are very wrong. The next three weeks were some of the most testing of my life. My group arrived and we quickly discovered that most of them had not only never been backpacking, but also did not realize what backpacking was. So from the beginning, my coleader and I knew it would be an uphill battle. In fact, it was just that- our first day in the backcountry

we climbed 6 miles uphill to our first camp. This was by far one of the most mentally draining days of my time as a leader. Encouraging our students to maintain positivity and perseverance was difficult enough, but we also needed to be teaching outdoor skills and environmental awareness. It is a humbling experience to be defeated as a leader and I can honestly say I lay in my tent that evening, wondering if I would be capable of completing the summer.



Views from the Jedidiah Smith Wilderness.

This was the theme of the summer- mental and physical exhaustion, paired with a packed itinerary and little time for rest. I might have gone to bed anxious about my leadership capability or about the fact that there was a storm looming as we were camped unprotected in a meadow; however, the days didn't cease to come, and I didn't stop waking up to inspire these students to be motivated outdoorspeople. It was this grit that I was trying to impart to my students that I also received a lesson in. Through this we accomplished over 50 miles of backcountry hiking, 20 miles of backcountry sea kayaking, various white water rafting sections, as well as Level I and II climbing schools.



Middle School Group in the Gros Ventre Wilderness (Six Lakes)

After learning a lesson in patience and determination with the middle school group, we had a whopping ONE DAY break before our next group arrived. The 12 high school students arrived in Jackson and we quickly realized that, with three weeks of middle schoolers, we were more comfortable with the trip itinerary and more confident in our ability to execute a meaningful experience for our students. This confidence was something I learned is necessary as a leader. Even if I didn't have the answer, I learned that instilling a feeling of confidence in our students that we could problem solve any situation together became the golden bullet to make our trips run smoothly. With our high schoolers, we conquered a rigorous 7-day backcountry section in the Wind River Range, tackling about 10 miles every day. The change in my students I observed over this week in the backcountry cannot be understated. Bravery, tenacity, and determination were qualities many of our students struggled with on the first long days. However, by our last day, every student became a supportive group member, motivating themselves and their peers to reach our goals. Not only did we help the group achieve personal goals, we also taught important environmental ecology topics and outdoor living skills, covering wildflowers, backcountry cooking, and Leave No Trace etiquette, just to name a few.



Sunset in the Wind River Range on our first night in the Backcountry (Upper Sweeney Lake)

It was a boost to group morale when we successfully completed our intended route, and it empowered me in this leadership role to be confident and flexible in tough decisions and group problem solving. They say you learn about yourself and the people around you ten times faster in a backcountry setting, and I can't argue with that after our experience in the Wind River Range. We went in a group of 12 students and 2 leaders, and came out a team, ready to tackle our next activities. Three days in Yellowstone on Lewis and Shoshone Lakes proved to be a relaxing change of pace from our ten mile days and we took it as an opportunity to rejuvenate before our most challenging portion of the trip- Level I & II climbing school and a summit attempt of the Grand Teton. Our students breezed through climbing school, and our mountaineering guides determined that every student was capable of making the summit attempt. The first day of the summit involves an 8 mile hike up switch backs and boulder fields to the Lower Saddle of the Grand Teton. This is by far the most challenging hike we did all summer. Several students struggled; however, every single student made it to the saddle, where we stayed in a hut for the night.



The Lower Saddle of the Grand Teton (Exum Hut seen in bottom right corner)



View into Idaho from the Lower Saddle.

The next morning, we woke at 3:15am to get an early start on the technical climb to the summit of the Grand. Unfortunately, one of our students was mentally spent and decided he could not make the climb. While I knew he was physically capable, he was adamant in staying at the hut even after encouragement. It was devastating to watch the rest of the group head up into the darkness of the summit, while I waited at the saddle with him. One of us had to stay with him and I drew the short straw. This surpassed my first day of backcountry hiking with middle schoolers as my most challenging day as a leader. It had not just been a group goal to summit the Grand Teton, but something I had been looking forward to for months. Here I was, high-fiving my students and co-leader as they left me and one of their peers behind. It took everything in me to maintain positivity in that moment of immense personal disappointment and resentment. I knew this student could accomplish this, and I felt I had failed as a leader as he insisted he would go no further. It was incredibly frustrating to fail in that moment. However, I learned this failure

is a part of leadership. In the end, this student had accomplished an incredible feat by just making it to the saddle and so we basked in that. I watched through binoculars as the group summited and descended. Filled with the pride of a proud parent, I was fulfilled in their accomplishments and also emotionally empty, drained by disappointment. I sat with my student all day, kissing the ground he walked on, while inside harboring such feelings, and this was in many ways my summit attempt. Remaining positive and encouraging with him in the face of such a defeat was my biggest accomplishment of the summer. Even in the face of clear failure, I spun the experience into a success, something I will forever take pride in.

We came down the mountain that day with the rest of the group, and celebrated our last day in Jackson with a whitewater rafting section, followed by a banquet dinner before we said goodbye to our final group. Staff wrap up awaited, where we turned in our paperwork from the summer and had our final meetings with our office staff and company director. It was in this experience, where I was able to reflect on my summer. This period of reflection was important to me because I received constructive criticism and feedback on the work I did this summer. It is something I learned is an integral part of any job going forward in my life.

Overall, this summer served to enrich me as a leader, steward of the environment, and a brother (now alumnus) of Alpha Sigma. It is my hope to be a connection for other brothers, seeking to do something impactful with their summers. Furthermore, this experience gave me further expertise in a field, which I am currently pursuing in my new position on Santa Catalina Island as an Environmental Instructor at the Catalina Environmental Leadership Program. Again, I would like to emphasize my gratitude to the Foundation for making this a possibility for me. I know it has served me well and I hope it will serve our community of brotherhood going forward.

Summary of Expenses:

Amount Awarded by Alpha Sigma Foundation: \$500.00

Travel Expenses to and from Jackson: \$475.00

Living costs in Jackson: \$415.00

Total Personal Contribution: \$390.00