Honoring Diversity in Outdoor Education
How St. John’s Outdoor University can more directly benefit Somali students

By Natalie Stoneburner Advisors: Dr. Christopher Thoms and Dr. Jean Lavigne
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Introduction:
St. John’s Outdoor University features a popular preK-12 program that provides field trips for local schools, particularly from the St. Cloud Public School District (isd742). OutdoorU’s preK-12 program “strives to improve environmental literacy and emotional connectedness to the natural world through hands-on and age-appropriate field trips”. Within the past twelve years, isd742 has experienced a tremendous increase in Somali immigrant or refugee students. The school district has begun to make changes to ensure the needs of this new population are being met. Not yet having made any changes of their own, OutdoorU’s traditional approach to providing environmental education to isd742’s students is now often ineffective. Staff from OutdoorU believe it is time to make changes to their programming to ensure they are fulfilling their mission in engaging every student who participates in a field trip.

Methods:
- Reflected on personal experiences working as a Student Naturalist for OutdoorU for the past four years.
- Reviewed case studies that demonstrate how students from diverse backgrounds, especially urban or immigrant students, have diverse learning needs.
- Conducted interviews with teachers from isd742 to better understand how classroom diversity has changed and how it is being addressed, as well as gain specific insight about how OutdoorU field trips could be improved for more diverse classes.
- Attended lectures and conducted interviews with members of Minnesota’s Somali community for personal stories of learning obstacles and advice for OutdoorU’s success.
- Continually consulted with OutdoorU staff to discuss research findings and possible changes.

Suggestions for Change:
- More staff to create smaller class sizes. This will allow for more accurate gauging of students’ familiarity with the class topic and nature in Minnesota, as well as time to differentiate student needs.
- Work with teachers to strengthen pre- and post-field trip activities. Moving any written work to the classroom will allow field trips to be purely exploratory.
- Create regular conversations both between OutdoorU staff and with local educators regarding teaching students from diverse backgrounds.
- Most importantly, continue teaching and practicing having open hearts and open minds.

Lessons from local Educators

“St. Cloud is changing. We need to adjust what we do and how we do it... this cookie-cutter approach that has worked so well for a long time is starting to not work anymore”
-Sarah Gainey, Education Coordinator at OutdoorU

“You have to differentiate everything. You can’t just do it the same way for everybody. There’s a lot of moving parts no matter what lesson you’re doing”
-Second Grade Teacher

“We come to the perception when we have students here from another country that education is not huge or that they don’t know things. I think of if I were to get plopped down in the middle of Norway, how would I do in my testing? How would I do if I were plopped down in, say, Costa Rica, I speak no Spanish, I know none of the animals, how silly would I look?”
-Junior high science teacher

“Sometimes the kids just need to go out and absorb rather than have anything taught or expected from them”
-Junior high science teacher

Isd742 at a Glance:
- 44% students of color, up from 26% in 2011
- 2,080 students with a primary home language of Somali, roughly 20% of student population
- 85% of Somali youth in the U.S. live in a low-income household

Isd742 sources:
- Sebastian Witherspoon, isd742 Director of Equity Services, Personal Communication
- The St. Cloud Times, “Fast Check: Somali Student Numbers”