

The Big Campus — Augsburg's River Semester

Story and Photos by Ryan Johnson



Top: Augsburg paddlers headed downriver from Winona, Minn., on a brisk day.
Above: Classroom walls were left behind, but not the computers.

I arrived on campus greeted by the aroma of strong coffee and a chilly hint of the approaching autumn. Students were still emerging from their dorms, others were congregating around the cafeteria. One man stood out with a slight air of authority, “You must be professor Joe Underhill,” I guessed.

“Indeed and welcome to our campus. These are our dorms. This is our cafeteria,” he pointed to the tents and the row of picnic tables.

“And this is our classroom,” gesturing towards the Mississippi River flowing past the camp.

The river is their classroom for the next three months, and the Semester on the River Expedition will span the river from the headwaters to the Gulf of Mexico.

I was blessed with the opportunity to get a seat in one of their beautiful 24-foot wooden voyageur canoes and to paddle with them for two days, from Winona, Minn., to La Crosse, Wis. The expedition on this leg of the journey is comprised of 12 students, two professors and three guides from Wilderness Inquiry, all packed into four voyageur canoes along with camping gear, cook stoves, food, libraries, laptops, solar charging cells and laboratory equipment.

Once the gear was packed, we pushed off from the shores of Prairie Island Campground and made our way down the backwaters under the growing warmth of the rising sun.

On reaching the Main Channel, I suggested an alternative route to take us along the back side of Latsch Island to show off Winona’s colorful boathouse community. I believe each member of the expedition found their perfect dream home among the houses floating on barrels beneath creaking wooden platforms. Not passing up an on-the-fly educational opportunity, discussions turned to the impact and



Above: The expedition left the river briefly to climb Brady's Bluff.

Right: The sturdy wooden canoes are designed for 10 paddlers.

regulations of these river-rat communities, as paddles dipped rhythmically into the river.

Wanting to show off more of my home stretch of the river, I suggested a quick detour to hike up Brady's Bluff, in Perrot State Park to one of the best views of the valley. The Wilderness Inquiry guides approved and the professors agreed it could fit into their schedule, so we secured our boats in the tall grass along the muddy shores of the boat landing. Students rifled through their drybags to swap sandals for footwear adequate for a hike 500 feet above the river. On the ascent we paused to admire a squadron of pelicans soaring majestically over the Trempealeau Wildlife Refuge to our west. Once we achieved the summit, most were in awe of this elevated perspective of the highway they had been traveling for two weeks. Small groups discussed how the geography had changed since leaving St. Paul and pondered about what it would have looked like thousands of years ago, when the magnificent river valley was being carved out by a rush of icy water from Glacial River Warren.

Before getting back on the water, we dug lunch out of one of the plastic totes loaded in the boats. A rotating roster of chores includes all members of the expedition. Today, Jubilee Prosser and Karl Hahn prepared the chicken salad sandwiches and peanut butter and jelly on bagels. With stomachs full and bladders empty, we filed back into the boats to continue downriver.





Above: The 17-member expedition paused briefly before hitting the water.

Below: Paddlers plan the day's journey.



Highlights of 2015 Semester on the River Itinerary

- **August 28-30:** Familiarization and orientation at Lake Itasca. The group drove up to the Mississippi headwaters with Wilderness Inquiry to familiarize themselves with the voyageur canoes and camping equipment, and to study the headwaters' environment.
- **September 1:** Launch from St. Paul in four voyageur canoes guided by Wilderness Inquiry. W.I. will lead the expedition 680 miles, from St. Paul to St. Louis.
- **November 2-6:** Expected arrival at St. Louis. Study the relationship between St. Louis and the river.
- **November 6-9:** Bus down to Memphis to meet with researchers from the Mississippi River Project at the University of Memphis.
- **November 10:** Bus down to Helena, Ark., to meet with Quapaw Outfitters and canoe 120 miles of the Lower Mississippi.
- **November 21-23:** Travel by van to the Atchafalaya River and Old River Control Structure to discuss flood control projects with the Army Corps of Engineers.
- **November 24-26:** Bus to New Orleans to meet with students from local universities and discuss environmental justice.
- **December 2-7:** Bus down to the Mississippi River Delta to meet with the Louisiana Marine Consortium. Explore the Gulf's marine biology and estuarine ecology in research vessels.
- **December 8-11:** Return by van to New Orleans for town hall meetings and a celebration. Board the train to return to St. Paul.
- **December 15-17:** Welcome back celebration at Augsburg College. End of semester and final papers due.

Two of the canoes proudly fly the maroon flag of Augsburg College, which stiffly indicated the headwinds we battled on our way past Trempealeau, Wis., in search of our designated campsite. With only four or five paddlers in each fully loaded boat — which were designed for 10 paddlers — the headwinds can be quite tiring hour after hour, day after day. But arm and torso muscles are growing stronger as the students earn their physical education credit.

We arrived at camp on schedule and were greeted by a pontoon boat of Trempealeau locals more than willing to trade some extra food for a few stories and laughs. We set up camp and some of the group broke off to hold class on the backside of Richmond Island under a sturdy oak tree, where Underhill led a discussion for his Environmental and River Politics class. While a group of students sitting under a tree on a secluded island with laptops may seem out of place, the echoing blasts of horns from trains and barges combined with a gentle breeze carrying the aroma of the river provided a rich backdrop not found in a typical classroom.

As class wrapped up, the students followed the smell of frying bacon back to the other side of the island. The cafeteria line stretched the length of the shore as everyone piled their plates high with a fabulous concoction of Italian carbonara and toasted garlic bread. Soon, the well fed students relaxed along the sandy beach sloping into the Mississippi. Then laptops were removed from waterproof cases and they resumed homework and reading as they swatted mosquitos. The professors made their rounds to each student and asked if they had any questions about the material or expectations of the days to come. Before sundown the guides and professors held a brief meeting to confirm plans and discuss group morale and energy levels. The glow from the setting sun was replaced by the glow of laptop screens and headlamps, while studies continued. Most were zipped up in their sleeping bags by 10. A brief but heavy rain in the middle of the night forced a few campers, myself included, to install rainflies over their tents.

The brilliant morning sun broke over the horizon, signaling the start of another day of learning on the Mississippi. The group was definitely getting into the swing of life on the river, as coffee and tea were poured while everyone packed up and breakfasted on oatmeal and fruit. Sunscreen was applied liberally, while the group rallied around a series of charts laid out on the sand and student navigators explained the route for the day. Regardless of what the winds had to say about it, we would reach La Crosse tonight and the Semester on the River Expedition would enjoy a few nights at a campground with hot showers, flush toilets and electricity. Layovers like this allow for keeping up with the coursework and recharging electronic devices and sore arms.

History of Semester on the River

This Semester on the River has been an evolving dream of Underhill's for more than a decade. As a political science



The canoes join the La Crosse Queen.

professor at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, the river, just blocks away, called to him as the ultimate teaching tool. In 2001 he made his first attempt to get Augsburg students studying on the water, with a three-day trip on the Mississippi from St. Cloud to St. Paul with boats rented from a local outfitter. As the trips grew in length, he learned he needed some assistance with paddling and camp logistics. This is where Wilderness Inquiry entered the picture. Based in Minneapolis, Wilderness Inquiry has decades of experience integrating education and adventure.

"They're a great team. They are pros. They have taken a huge load off of me, so I can focus on teaching," Underhill explained.

By gradually increasing the length of the trips and partnering with guiding companies, Underhill was able to demonstrate to the administration the feasibility of squeezing hours of education on top of paddling five to eight hours a day.

He was finally given the green light to launch an all-out, semester-long trip. Whereas previous trips awarded only one class's worth of credits, this semester-long version offers a full course load to the paddling pupils. Each student is participating in several of the courses led by Underhill or assistant professor Thorpe Halloran, ranging from Environmental Organizations, Democracy in America's Heartland, Stream Ecology, Environmental and River Politics, Research Methods and Intro to Environmental Science. The guides from W.I. lead the coursework and award credits in Physical Education for the sweat equity invested in paddling.

Each student also has an individual project to complete on the journey, mentored by one of the professors on the trip or back on campus. They include public health of those who live and eat on the river, calculating caloric expenditures, light pollution, water quality, urban stormwater runoff and creating a feature-length documentary. 🌊📷

Ryan Johnson is a contributing editor to Big River. His last story was "Forging a Driftless Culture," July-August 2015.