

Grand Perspectives

August 20, 2008 1:45 AM Ryan Rivet
rrivet@tulane.edu

“There is nothing insignificant in the world. It all depends on the point of view,” said German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This summer, a group of six Tulane students experienced what a change in perspective might do for them during a 7-day raft trip through the natural wonder of the Grand Canyon.



Tulane students take to the water during their 7-day raft trip in the Grand Canyon, organized by geology professor Ron Parsley as part of a multidisciplinary class. (Photos by Ron Parsley)

“Millions of people go to the Grand Canyon and stand on the rim, look down, then go jump back in their air-conditioned car and go have lunch,” says geology professor and trip organizer [Ron Parsley](#).

“We decided that a better way to do this was to get on a boat and spend a week looking at the canyon from the bottom up.”

This year was the 33rd time Tulane students took the trip, but the first time since Hurricane Katrina. The excursion is the culminating experience of the Grand Canyon

colloquium course offered in the spring semester, a multidisciplinary class that focuses on a broad range of aspects of the Grand Canyon.

“The idea is to look at the Grand Canyon as a classroom where we have excellent geology, biology, anthropology and history,” Parsley says.

Parsley admits the course is tough and takes a lot of work. Lengthy term papers and oral presentations are the norm, but he believes all the work pays dividends once students get on the river.

“By the time people get back they think all the effort they put into the course is well worth it,” Parsley adds. “They got a lot out of it. They learned a lot and we also find that learning and having a good time are not mutually exclusive endeavors.”

Anthropology professor and trip veteran [Judith Maxwell](#) agrees that the trip augments the classroom experience.



“We try to look at the Grand Canyon as a classroom,” says geology professor Ron Parsley, whose students learn a new perspective from their Grand Canyon trip.

“So many students that I have seen come alive on the trip,” says Maxwell.

“They've done projects and they can point out, for example, the plant life on the river. One of the students on this trip was a geology major and he was rapt the

entire time.”

According to Maxwell, the trip is an opportunity for personal growth as well a time to disconnect from technology and connect with people.

“I know many people for whom this is so outside the pale of what they normally do, it's transformative. You learn a lot about yourself on the river,” Maxwell says. “It's also a wonderful opportunity to spend quality time with people. Sitting and talking to people is a revolutionary experience these days.”

Though not by design, the trip has become a well-kept secret on campus since Hurricane Katrina. Whereas only six students took the course this year, in years past, Parsley says he would routinely expect around 20. Both Parsley and Maxwell hope to get the word out about the course in order to get back to pre-Katrina numbers.

“In previous years, our best publicity was students who had taken the course, and been on the trip before.” Maxwell says. “We didn't have any students from the preceding year in the wake of Katrina. So we lost that word of mouth.”

“I'm hoping that we can revitalize this and keep it going,” Parsley says. “It's a really good educational experience.”