



Garrett College, Adventuresports Institute (brief editorial)  
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## “HOW I GOT SCHOOLED”

By Mary Zook

An alarm on my tent-mate’s phone buzzes and we stir in our cozy sleeping bags. “I’ll start the coffee if you pack the tent,” one of them says, and the other nods. We warm up gradually as we shuffle

through our morning tasks at the

Seneca Rocks Mountain

Guides basecamp – getting dressed (probably in the same

clothes as yesterday), double checking our backpacks for

sunscreen and belay devices, filling our water bottles and scarfing some oatmeal in the open-air kitchen,

before finally meeting our two instructors and other classmates on the deck to check ropes and stretch.

Across the road and beyond the trees, the contours of Seneca Rocks are unmistakable, starkly outlined against the pale morning sky. The familiar sandstone summits



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are beautiful no matter the weather, and my phone is cluttered with images of it gleaming in sunlight, accompanied by fluffy clouds, and partially obscured by fog. I drain my coffee mug, shoulder my backpack, and smile. The side of a mountain may not resemble any other classroom, but for my fellow ASI classmates and me, it's just another school day. My classmates and I will start our day by crossing the river and hiking a rugged jeep road, before turning off and making our way up a grueling approach of knee-high stone steps, affectionately called (and sometimes not so affectionately) the "thigh master." Our day will primarily consist of multi-pitch climbing, tying knots, cleaning pro gear behind our instructors, and continuously calling "on belay!" At the end of the day, we'll come back down to the kitchen deck to organize our gear once again and compare bruises before cooking dinner together. Just another typical

school day, right?



I first learned about Garrett College and the Adventure Sports Institute (ASI) from an article about outdoor schools in Blue Ridge Outdoors.

Though much smaller than a typical institution (Garrett has about 800 students, and the ASI has between 30 and 40), the two-year program

provides all the necessary skill courses

and certifications for a career in the outdoor

industry, and culminates in an associate's degree which can be completed at several nearby universities – specifically Frostburg and West Virginia University. Favorably situated near Deep Creek, Maryland, ASI students can learn many of their outdoor skills within a few hours' drive of campus at beautiful locations including Coopers Rocks state park, the Youghiogheny river, Big Bear lake, White Grass ski area, Herrington Manor state park, and of course, Seneca Rocks. The program provides all the necessary equipment, and certification fees are included in the semester's course cost.

After taking two years off from school and working at three youth camps, the prospect of earning a degree early and spending more class time outdoors than in was extremely attractive. I come from a fairly adventurous and active family, and could easily see myself entering a future

career in the outdoor industry. I visited the Institute and was immediately smitten with their well-stocked equipment center (beautiful bikes everywhere!) and enthusiastic faculty. Within two semesters at the ASI, I donned cross country skis for the first time, performed litter-lowers on the face of Seneca, sketched myself out on the Via Ferrata, managed to keep up during mountain biking class, rafted class three rapids at the Adventure Sports Center International (ASCI), and earned my Wilderness First Responder certification after nine days of scenarios in



temperatures under 15°F (I can't feel my fingers, but I can splint a fractured femur with a small sapling). My spring semester culminated in a four-day backpacking trip as part of a Leave No Trace Master Educator course in the Canaan Wilderness of West Virginia. We braved three days of constant rain and trails flooded with shin-deep water, but those few days in the woods with my friends were

probably my favorite from that whole semester.

After an experience on a camp challenge course helped end my childhood anxiety, I became intensely aware of the life-changing power of outdoor and experiential education. However, I never expected I would go to a real outdoor school with real outdoor people. I never guessed that I could spend a few semesters climbing rocks and riding a bike through mud puddles, and then get a degree for it. But of course it's more than that. I'm learning how to lead people safely in the outdoors and share with them why adventures are so important and life-changing. I'm building relationships and community with students who share my passion of the outdoors, sustainability, and defying the unemployed dirt bag stereotype. I'm learning to trust my instructors and my equipment and, perhaps most importantly, my own skills. If all goes according to my plans and hopes, maybe dangling from a cliff won't be just another school day – it will be just another work day. Rock on!

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Thank you to [blueridgeoutdoors.com](http://blueridgeoutdoors.com) for permission do republish Mary's article on our website and, of course Mary Zook-Tapolyai, for writing such a great published article. Mary also has written an article for the AEE Journal this past May and the "Blackalachian" article for Blue Ridge Outdoor Magazine.