



Academics AND Curriculum



High School
Summer
Semester

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Academics & Curriculum

Our School

Founded in 2009, the National Center for Outdoor & Adventure Education (NCOAE) is a values-driven, student-centered institution that offers transformative adventure-based education. NCOAE is an accredited organization recognized by Cognia, the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), and the Commission on Accreditation of Pre-Hospital Continuing Education (CAPCE), and we deliver a range of academic and skill-based programs tailored to both high school and post-secondary students.

Our high school semester programs are designed to challenge and inspire students, offering Honors-level and Advanced Topics in Natural Sciences, along with required electives in Outdoor Leadership and Environmental Ethics. These courses blend rigorous academic instruction with hands-on learning in natural settings, fostering a deep connection between students and the environment.

For students who have already graduated from high school or are in post-secondary education, our Gap Semester programs provide an enriching experience that bridges the gap between traditional education and real-world application. With a focus on the pedagogy of Outdoor Leadership and Environmental Ethics, these programs also prioritize personal growth, leadership development, and outdoor skills, equipping participants with the tools they need to thrive in both their academic and professional lives.

NCOAE is a recognized leader in emergency medicine education, offering high-quality training for those pursuing careers as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) and Wilderness Medicine professionals. Our courses are designed to meet the highest standards of medical training, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to handle emergencies in both urban and remote settings.

In addition to our semester and gap programs, NCOAE offers a variety of summer programs that cater to students of all ages. These programs provide a unique opportunity for participants to immerse themselves in outdoor adventure while developing critical life skills. Whether it's backpacking through the rugged wilderness of North Carolina, exploring the diverse landscapes of Oregon, or experiencing the rich cultures of Ecuador and Patagonia, our summer programs are designed to challenge, inspire, and educate.

With our headquarters in North Carolina and base camps in Oregon, Idaho, Ecuador, and Patagonia, NCOAE is committed to delivering exceptional educational experiences in some of the most stunning natural environments on the planet. Our programs are guided by a deep commitment that fosters leadership, resilience, and a lifelong passion for learning. Through academic courses, emergency medicine training, or summer adventures, NCOAE empowers students to reach their full potential and make a positive impact on the world around them.

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Our Mission, Vision, and Core Values

At NCOAE, our **mission** is to design and deliver handcrafted outdoor and adventure education experiences that promote personal growth, professional development and stewardship in our communities and natural environment.

As a result of our work, our **vision** is a world supported by people and institutions who are naturally inclined to serve one another while protecting the natural environment.

As a values-driven organization, we are guided by the following six **core values**:

- **Challenge by Choice:** Self-determination allows us to challenge ourselves and others, enhance knowledge and understanding, develop new skills, change attitudes and behaviors, and build confidence.
- **Proactiveness:** Being prepared allows us to mitigate risks, improve student experiences, advance our internal processes, and plan for and be comfortable with the unknown.
- **Collaboration:** Thoughtful collaboration, based on the acknowledgement of one another's strengths, allows us to optimize our business operations and deliver transformative student experiences.
- **Innovation:** By learning from our own experiences and championing original and derivative thinking, we seek to differentiate ourselves and provide unmatched experiences for those we serve.
- **Compassion:** We relate with others through acceptance and understanding in order to promote personal growth and engaging student experiences in a supportive community.
- **Resiliency:** We persist in the face of adversity, learn from failure, and adapt and evolve to become stronger and wiser.

Risk Management at NCOAE

At NCOAE, risk management is at the core of everything we do, embedded in our policies, procedures, and training. School safety depends on clear communication and collaboration between our staff, first responders, law enforcement, and emergency managers to prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from various hazards and threats. Our School Risk Management Plan outlines essential procedures to handle these challenges effectively.

We take a proactive approach, ensuring that our field staff and course participants are well-trained in best practices for outdoor education. Wilderness emergency procedures are regularly practiced, ensuring that any issues in the field are managed safely and efficiently, including the correct execution of evacuation protocols. Additionally, we maintain detailed written records of all incidents, including near misses, from each trip. This data informs our annual review of risk management policies and allows us to continually refine our training programs and enhance our approach to safety. At NCOAE, managing risk is an ongoing process, vital to the success and safety of every experience we facilitate.

Curriculum Overview

The NCOAE curriculum offers a diverse array of courses that integrate traditional academics with specialized outdoor-based electives. Students can take Natural Science and Spanish language courses, alongside a unique elective focused on leadership and environmental ethics.

Each class is delivered at the Honors or Advanced Topics level, ensuring a rigorous academic experience. The course lineup includes:

- **Core Elective:** Principles in Leadership and Environmental Ethics (PLEE)
- **Science:** Natural Science
- **Spanish Language:** Offered during the NCOAE Ecuador Summer Block and our Spring/Fall Gap Semester

Assessment

NCOAE faculty members employ a variety of evaluation techniques throughout the semester, while still incorporating common assessment methods. Students are evaluated through a combination of practical exams, field studies, and class participation, alongside quizzes, tests, and research papers, creating a well-rounded approach to student assessment.

At NCOAE, we utilize a standards-based assessment model, which aligns instruction, evaluation, and academic reporting with clearly defined standards directly linked to the learning objectives of each course. Rather than receiving grades on individual assignments, students are assessed based on how well they meet specific standards, receiving detailed feedback that highlights their progress along the way to course completion.

This approach shifts the focus from traditional grading to a deeper emphasis on learning, prioritizing individual growth over comparisons between students. Standards-based assessment reinforces the idea that learning is an ongoing process, one that students can shape through their personal efforts and dedication.

At NCOAE, students receive feedback on specific Skills of Learning, which may be delivered as narrative feedback or as a score on a 1-4 rubric. Although each discipline may have its own terminology for the rubric levels, all classes adhere to the following basic rubric scale:

- 1 = Beginning (55%)
- 2 = Developing (70%)
- 3 = Accomplished (85%)
- 4 = Exemplary (100%)

Each rubric level includes a descriptive label and corresponds to a percentage, which may contribute to a final grade calculation.

Accreditation

At NCOAE, we value the power of accreditation. By understanding and adhering to the standards and best practices of our peers, we enhance our own approach to management and field operations, while also contributing to the advancement of the sectors of industry and practice in which we operate.

Our accreditations include:

Cognia: We are accredited by Cognia, an internationally recognized organization that ensures educational institutions meet the highest standards of quality. Cognia accreditation not only reflects our commitment to providing an exceptional learning environment where students can thrive academically and personally — it ensures that NCOAE’s academic credits are transferrable to acceptance at private, public, and independent schools in the United States and across the globe. With Cognia’s rigorous evaluation process, you can trust that our programs are continuously improving and aligned with best practices in education.

Association for Experiential Education (AEE): We are accredited by the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), a leading authority in promoting and recognizing excellence in outdoor education, adventure-based, and experiential learning. This accreditation underscores our dedication to hands-on, immersive education that goes beyond traditional classroom learning. With AEE’s rigorous standards, our programs are designed to foster personal growth, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving skills, all while maintaining or exceeding AEE’s standards for risk management, program operations, and more.

Commission on Accreditation for Pre-Hospital Continuing Education (CAPCE): We are also accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Pre-Hospital Continuing Education (CAPCE), an organization dedicated to ensuring the highest quality in EMS (emergency medical services) education. This accreditation demonstrates our commitment to providing top-tier continuing education programs for pre-hospital care professionals, ensuring that our medical education and training is taught and evaluated at the highest levels.

Additionally, NCOAE is approved by the North Carolina Office of EMS (NCOEMS) to deliver EMT training to students interested in satisfying eligibility requirements for the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) exam and state EMT exams.

Courses

Course 1: Principles of Leadership and Environmental Ethics

Principles of Leadership and Environmental Ethics (PLEE) serves as the cornerstone course for our summer and gap semester programs. Emphasizing both community and individual growth, PLEE integrates four core areas:

- Leadership
- Risk Management
- Environmental Ethics
- Technical Outdoor Skills

On campus, students delve into a variety of readings and case studies that cover risk management, environmental ethics, and leadership theories. These discussions build the foundation that students will carry with them into real-world applications during their field experiences.

PLEE is also the primary course at NCOAE that prepares students for the practical challenges they will encounter during the summer block and gap semester programs. In the field, students engage with real-world scenarios that hone their leadership, communication, risk management, and technical outdoor skills. These practical experiences complement classroom discussions, enabling students to apply their knowledge both on campus and during expeditions.

Leadership concepts are introduced through the study of philosophical ethics, with a particular focus on humanity's interaction with the natural environment. By examining a range of philosophical viewpoints and actively engaging with nature, students deepen their connection to the world around them. PLEE encourages reflective thinking through writing assignments and other activities designed to help students explore and articulate their personal environmental ethics. The culmination of this process is the "Environmental Ethics Reflection Presentation," where students present and defend their perspectives before their peers and instructors.

Fieldwork and expedition skills, along with leadership and community-building abilities, are primarily developed during the field experience portion of each semester. In PLEE, students are introduced to the essential skills required for backcountry travel and camping, including navigation, map reading, self-care in challenging environments, and expedition behavior, such as teamwork and cooking. These skills are designed to enhance their connection to the natural world and support their overall development as leaders in outdoor settings.

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Course Outcomes

By the end of the *Principles of Leadership and Environmental Ethics* course, students will have developed the ability to lead effectively in outdoor settings, apply ethical principles to environmental decision-making, and navigate the complexities of community dynamics. They will also gain practical skills essential for risk management and outdoor leadership.

Specific course outcomes include:

- Mastery of Leadership and Community Dynamics
- Application of Environmental Ethic
- Development of Technical Outdoor Skills
- Proficiency in Risk Management-Decision Making-Problem Solving
- Integration of Reflective Thinking

Course 2: Science — Natural Science

The NCOAE honors-level Natural Science course is an Advanced Topic that immerses students in a comprehensive, ecology-based curriculum that fosters curiosity and a deep understanding of ecosystems in diverse regions. These include Southeast Mountains and Seaway, Oregon’s high desert plains, and Ecuador’s Andes Mountains and Amazon River. Through a blend of classroom theory and field studies, students learn to interpret natural landscape patterns, understand ecological interactions, and assess human impact on these systems. Key concepts such as migration, adaptation, ecological succession, and biodiversity are explored, laying a strong foundation in scientific inquiry.

As the course progresses, students examine the environmental impacts of land, water, and natural resource use on both regional and global scales. They engage with scientific literature, participate in guest lectures, discussions, and group projects, and undertake in-depth field studies. By the end, students will have developed the ability to critically analyze environmental issues, communicate scientific findings, and connect with the world through a nuanced ecological perspective.

Specific Course Outcomes and Goals — Students will:

- Understand the dynamic relationships between biotic and abiotic components of ecosystems;
- Communicate scientific analysis to various audiences;
- Cultivate curiosity through scientific inquiry and observation; and
- Improve critical thinking skills by actively engaging in the scientific process.

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Course 3: Intermediate Spanish for Ecuador Summer Block and Gap Semesters

At NCOAE, our Intermediate Spanish course is built on a comprehensive approach to language learning by focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and the development of the four key linguistic skills:

1. Reading
2. Writing
3. Speaking
4. Listening

At the 30,000-foot level, our Spanish curriculum is designed to enhance language proficiency while fostering critical thinking and effective communication. Throughout our Spanish courses, including the Intermediate Spanish course that is offered during our Ecuador Summer Block and Gap Semesters, students revisit familiar grammar and verb tenses while also being introduced to new vocabulary and more advanced linguistic structures.

This foundation supports the development of essential cognitive skills such as critical analysis, constructive feedback, risk-taking, and clear communication, all while encouraging qualities like persistence, empathy, and social responsibility.

From an experiential perspective, students engage in a variety of tasks, including daily conversations, skits, discussions, presentations, and creative writing, to assess and improve their proficiency in each of the four language skills listed above. By the end of the course, students will have deepened their understanding of the Spanish language and gained insight into cultural and global issues, particularly those related to immigration.

Intermediate Spanish Course: In-depth

Our Intermediate Spanish course is designed to further develop students' language skills through immersive learning, conducted primarily in Spanish. Successful completion of this course enhances vocabulary and fluency, helping students move from the ACTFL Novice High to Intermediate Medium proficiency levels. With 70 percent of the course delivered in Spanish, students are encouraged to express themselves more fully and naturally.

The course is structured around three thematic units:

1. Identity and History
2. Storytelling
3. Modes of Communication

Over the course of the semester, students explore verb tenses, including present, preterite conjugations, imperfect, future, conditional, and perfect tenses. Through unique assignments like the ones listed below, students practice speaking, listening, grammar, and vocabulary in

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real-world contexts:

- Crafting a unique story script
- Creating a report on an indigenous group in the areas where our learning occurs
- A poetry project
- Writing reflective essays

Additional activities, such as informal skits and speaking exercises, further reinforce these skills, ensuring a well-rounded linguistic experience.

Course Outcomes

By the end of the Intermediate Spanish course for the Ecuador Summer Block and Gap Semesters, students will have significantly improved their Spanish language proficiency, particularly in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They will also have gained a deeper understanding of cultural and global issues affecting the areas where their course takes place, which will further build and enhance their ability to communicate effectively in diverse contexts.

Specific course outcomes include:

- **Advanced Language Proficiency:** Students who successfully complete this course will have achieved a higher level of fluency and accuracy in Spanish, moving from the ACTFL Novice High to Intermediate Medium proficiency levels through immersive practice.
- **Mastery of Grammar and Vocabulary:** Students will develop a strong command of complex verb tenses and an expanded vocabulary, enabling more natural and precise communication in various settings.
- **Effective Communication Skills:** Course participants will have enhanced their ability to express ideas clearly and confidently in spoken and written Spanish, focusing on themes of identity, history, storytelling, and modes of communication.
- **Cultural Awareness and Insight:** Deepen understanding of cultural and global issues — particularly those related to immigration and indigenous groups — through hands-on research projects and reflective writing.
- **Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills:** Strengthen cognitive abilities by engaging in activities that require critical analysis, creative thinking, and constructive feedback within the context of language learning.
- **Experiential Learning and Practical Application:** Apply language skills in real-world contexts through interactive tasks such as daily conversations, skits, presentations, and creative projects — all of which play a role in a well-rounded linguistic and cultural education.

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