

A hand wearing a black sleeve and a brown watch holds a clear glass bottle with a faceted stopper. The bottle is partially filled with water and has some sediment at the bottom. The background shows a wide river under a clear blue sky, with a sandy bank and some bare branches in the foreground.

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

HOW TO LAUNCH A RIVER SEMESTER: CREATING EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAMS

By Joseph Underhill

How do we create the wildly different kinds of programs needed to respond to the multiple, compounding crises of our day in the context of the tradition-bound institutions of higher learning? My response to that question

has been to work on creating the River Semester program, which takes students down the length of the Mississippi River on a 100-day expedition. On learning of the River Semester, many folks in higher education have wondered how it came



Hope's Return on the Mississippi River. Image courtesy of Joseph Underhill.

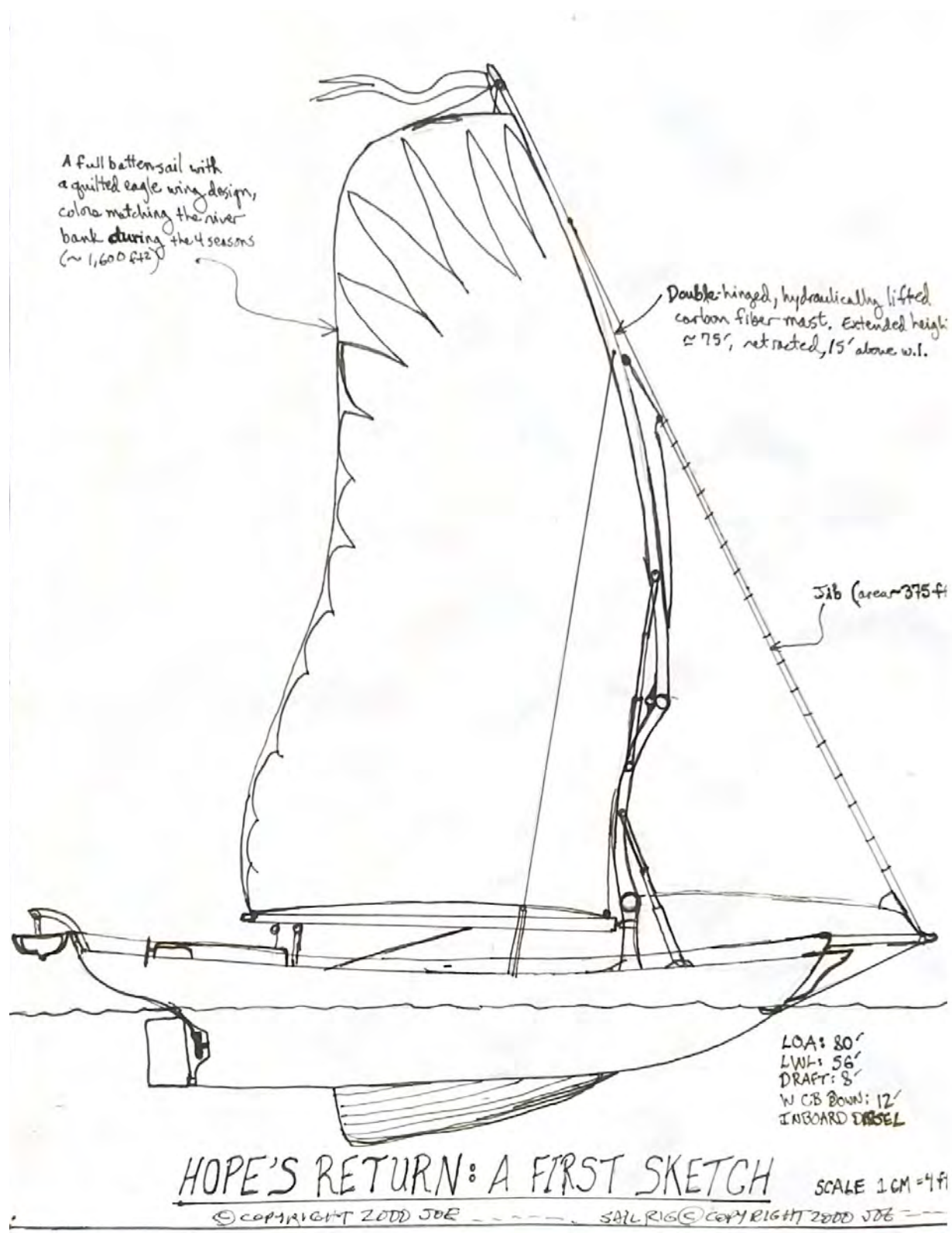
to be. In early 2000, having recently started work at Augsburg University (then Augsburg College), which is located just a few blocks from the Mississippi, I began dreaming about some way to get students out on the river. I sketched out a picture of a big river sailboat and the idea for a program called the River Education and Arts Program, or REAP (see photo above). I initially tried getting financial support from local philanthropists but was unsuccessful. I then created a January term course called “Environmental and River Politics” that explored the way that the Mississippi River has shaped and been shaped by the human communities along its length. The following year, I turned it into a summer course that included a five-day trip on the Mississippi. Over a few years, I built up connections to local nonprofits and programs related to the Mississippi River, including [Urban Boatbuilders](#), the [University of Minnesota’s River Life](#) program, [Friends of the Mississippi River](#), and [Wilderness Inquiry](#). With those partners and their collective wisdom, in 2015 we launched a program that took a group of undergraduate students down the length of the Mississippi River in canoes. That program then connected with the [Anthropocene River Project](#), the [River Field Studies network](#), and now the [Mississippi River Open School](#).

For faculty, staff, and students interested in developing alternative programs and pedagogies, I am sharing a rough set of observations and reflections on what has worked for me in developing, implementing, and sustaining the River Semester. This is just one kind of program that has worked relatively well in one particular institutional and geographical context. Other kinds of experimental educational programs that address current environmental and social justice crises are most likely to succeed if they respond to, and are based in, their own contexts. My observations and experiences apply mostly to faculty with tenure-track positions at smaller colleges or universities, since that is the context in which this particular experiment took place and with which I am most familiar. With that in mind,

this article includes ideas about how to navigate institutional bureaucracy, push the boundaries of existing rules, raise funds, recruit students, deal with legal or liability concerns, and overcome the various obstacles to teaching and learning outside the bounds of the standard, carbon-intensive, and often extractive systems in which higher education is entangled (Paredes-Canencio, et al. 2024; paperson 2017).

One: Begin with a positive, problem-solving mindset, with the presumption that a nontraditional education program can happen. Without a clear sense of agency and optimism, any innovative programming is almost certainly doomed to failure. I would not have pursued these kinds of nontraditional courses if I started with the attitude that they were dependent on the approval of the higher-ups or administrators. Within established institutions of higher education, folks can sometimes feel helpless or beholden to these authorities. In my experience, the key is to approach the proposal of an unconventionally shaped course with the mindset of a problem solver. I didn’t ask, “can this happen?” I asked, “how do we make this happen?” By looking for the way forward, I found routes through the obstacles. With this mindset, every objection or reason not to proceed became instead a problem to be solved.

Two: Go big or go home. To do this kind of innovative work, educators need a clear and inspiring vision, something that is sufficiently different and intriguing to draw interest from both students and administrators. I started small and built credibility, first establishing proof of concept with short-term courses. Eventually, I was ready to offer something sufficiently ambitious to get people excited. Taking folks out on the river for a few days is fine, but doing the whole river on a 100-day trip? That is something people get excited about. At my institution, I found that the further outside the box and innovative my idea was, the less the administration could say; they didn’t have the necessary expertise to critique the project. When I presented the idea for a



A conceptual sketch of "Hope's Return," a sailboat designed for the Mississippi River, featuring a full batten sail with an eagle wing design and a double-hinged, hydraulically lifted carbon fiber mast. Image courtesy of Joseph Underhill.

river semester to the committee at Augsburg that approves curricula, they didn't offer much feedback, as none of the committee members had experience with a program like this. Would this work? The committee members couldn't say one way or the other and deferred to my own experience on the river.

Three: A nontraditional education program should be ambitious, but it does still need to be feasible. There are obvious limits (budgetary, physics, time, etc.) to any project like this. The trick for me was to figure out exactly how far I could push things, which I discovered by trial and error. When I found my project to be overly ambitious, I did scale it back somewhat. I also recognized that if it was really easy, then I could push for something more ambitious. I started my project by thinking about building a large sailboat that would have cost at least \$1 million. I had to scale back those plans. The fact that I was not able to implement that initial ambitious proposal was not a sign of failure, but a signal that a different, more modest approach was called for.

Four: Building nontraditional educational programs requires patience, persistence, and commitment to the project. I found that I was able to sustain this commitment in part because I was deeply passionate about it, as it was a reflection of who I am and my values. This connection to the work gave me the ability to work very hard on it for a long time, and to sacrifice other things (friends, family, publishing, sleeping) in order to see it through. It took a long time. If you need or expect a project like this to happen in the short term, know that it probably won't. In my experience, this kind of project requires hundreds of hours of volunteer time and labor to make it happen; that's just the nature of this kind of transformative, innovative work. You do it because you enjoy it and are committed to it, not because you're getting paid to do it (at least not at first, and maybe never).

Five: This kind of nontraditional education experience may not be possible in all institutional contexts. It may seem counterintuitive, but the bigger and wealthier the institution, the more hurdles and barriers there may be. In my experience, this worked well in a more permissive institutional context. In many cases, smaller and less wealthy institutions, in part because they are understaffed, do not have the institutional capacity to monitor or stop projects from moving forward. Smaller, teaching-focused institutions also are often not as concerned about academic prestige (publications, large grants, ranking, etc.) and thus are more open to unconventional kinds of pedagogy and curriculum. Many innovative and unusual programs have come out of smaller schools, such as the schools in the Ecoleague, Evergreen College, Northern Arizona University and Prescott College (the Grand Canyon Semester), Whitman College (Semester in the West), and Emory & Henry College (Semester-A-Trail). For those outside of academia or other formal institutional settings, or at larger and more highly regulated institutions, this list of recommendations may need to be modified to find success within the constraints of those contexts.

Six: Be flexible. Be iterative. Keep trying, learning, adjusting, and improving. Meander like a river.

I did not end up creating the River Education and Arts Program I initially envisioned. As certain ways forward became impractical, I revised plans, scaled them back, and tried different ideas. The key thing is just to keep moving forward. Rivers meander, but there is also no stopping a river. My program started with a five-day trip, and then a week-long trip, and then worked with an outfitter, and then did a ten-day trip, at the end of which we thought, "why stop there?" At each stage, a fluvial restlessness pushed us forward. As we bumped into obstacles, we adjusted course but kept moving downstream.

Seven: With time, many faculty will build up credibility and authority at their institution. While it isn't necessary to wait until getting tenure, tenure does make some things easier to do. I started working on river programming in my third year at Augsburg University, but did not get the full semester program approved until after having gotten tenure and after having run a number of shorter trips on the river. By then, people at my institution trusted that I knew what I was doing.

Eight: Think about how to sell the program to the institution. I found that it was helpful to market a nontraditional education program as a chance to distinguish the institution from its peers—something that would make the school unique or at least unusual. A key element of this is showing that the program can pay for itself and generate enough revenue to be sustainable. I learned to be comfortable working with budget spreadsheets, estimating costs, coming up with recruitment strategies and pipelines, and attending to more details related to the logistics of the project. These are not skills generally learned in graduate school, so I had to teach myself and be willing to pick up these kinds of practical skills in order to keep developing the program.

Nine: Show evidence of success through the *fait accompli*. In some instances, it is possible to run a program or build some part of it without going through too many institutional channels. Once the program is done and in place and useful, it becomes much harder for institutions to say no. For me, it was clear that the more work my project made for other people, the more likely administrators were to oppose it. If, on the other

hand, it would take more work for them to stop a project (or undo it), then administrators are more likely to allow it to proceed. Again, this works better in underfunded institutions where there are fewer staff members and everyone is overworked.

Ten: In terms of insurance and risk, colleges have surprisingly good coverage. Students travel all over the world and engage in all sorts of risky activities that are covered by the insurance policies of the sending institutions. Although many might expect otherwise, insurance coverage has basically been a non-issue for us. As the instructor, my responsibility is to take care of the students, not do anything stupid or reckless, hire good outfitters, and have students sign waivers. We have developed an extensive set of safety protocols, have a full risk-management manual, and been able to keep everyone safe and cared for on the trip.

Eleven: There is money available. Universities are multimillion-dollar institutions drawing on tuition, fees, financial aid, large endowments, and so on. The River Semester is funded primarily by the tuition and program fees paid by students, who in turn have access to financial aid. This can generate a significant amount of revenue to pay for these kinds of programs. There are grants available as well, and we continue to work on applying for grants and outside support.

Twelve: Build a network of like-minded teachers, organizations, and schools. There are some really great folks and programs out there to connect with.

Conclusion

It has not been easy creating and maintaining the River Semester, and several times it has almost been cancelled. But with any luck, and with a continuation of the attitude and approach that led to its creation, I am hopeful that it will continue.

One of the more gratifying parts of the process of developing and running the program has been to see how it has sparked interest among other faculty, educators, and community organizers in developing similarly unusual and experimental

programs. As we continue through the twenty-first century, with climate change, artificial intelligence, resurgent ethnonationalism, and a swirl of economic and social challenges intensifying, I think we will need to keep thinking outside the box about how we educate students to successfully navigate these challenges. The

River Semester has been my response to what I have experienced as the problems of modern life. Other responses will reflect the particular resources, constraints, and priorities found in other contexts, but it is exciting to think about what kinds of creative responses we can dream up and make real in the years to come.

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