Camp Juliette Low Unit Leader

Sydney Gaylor

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**Internship Title:**  Camp Juliette Low Unit Leader and Counselor in Training Director

**Student Name:**  Sydney Gaylor

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**STUDENT SIGNATURE**  

**DATE:**  8/14/2022
This summer I worked for Camp Juliette Low in Cloudland, Georgia. I started going to this camp in 2011 as a camper, so it was an ideal place for me to work. I already had a connection to my internship site and had ideas on how I could use what I learned in my classes to meet the overarching goals of the camp.

My first learning objective was to observe first hand how different age groups interact with and experience nature. At Camp Juliette Low, campers and staff live in four person platform tents. Kids and staff are all surrounded by nature at all times. My first group of campers were aged 11-13. Some were already comfortable with their environment while others struggled more with the transition. Common concerns were large spiders and bugs at night. My next group was aged 9-11. Initially, I did not think the two year age difference would be that noticeable. However, the younger children were much more aware of their environment and the possible hazards like snakes, wind, storms, etc. Even though the wind was mild and we never saw a snake, the campers viewed the environment through a lens of discomfort.

During the final weeks of my internship I worked with Counselors In Training (CITs) aged 16 and 17. By this age, they lived in and among nature with a level of familiarity and comfort. This is likely due to spending many summers at the camp, but teenagers in general are likely to have already developed a personal relationship and comfort level when compared to young children.

My second goal was to develop and execute nature and outdoor based curriculum for various ability levels. Not every child has a background that includes spending time outdoors, so I wanted to improve at fostering an appreciation for nature in all participants, even the most trepidatious. This goal really came into play with my younger campers. Many had never been to our camp before and had no outdoor experience. Georgia lacks many of the recreational activities and outdoorsy culture common in the northwest, so many of the campers’ parents also lacked the nature-related backgrounds and hobbies.

Young children need opportunities to explore nature at their own pace within a controlled setting. Providing them with a goal can help facilitate their experience, even if that goal does not directly relate to environmental education. For example, an activity where young campers paint rocks they find is primarily for entertainment, but the act of gathering rocks fosters curiosity. Asking the kids why they chose the
rocks they did encouraged them to reflect on which elements of nature they have considered and which they hadn’t. It is a small activity, but it works in tandem with others to foster a positive relationship with nature early in a child’s life. Another activity I developed and executed involved campers using their surroundings near a lake to create boats for frogs. This activity was successful for multiple reasons. First, it intrigued all age levels involved (8-15). They made boats based on their experience level and comfort with venturing into the woods or staying nearer to the path. It also allowed the children to consider the smaller parts of their environment (bark, sticks, grasses, flowers) and how they make up the greater whole. I seized the opportunity while they were building to point out neat spiderwebs with dew drops on them, different types of trees and flowers, and, if campers were looking for a specific material, ask them where they thought it might grow. Some campers went so far as to catch little frogs to be captains of their ships, which expanded the conversation into how frogs interact with their environment and where they live. This activity was the perfect mix of education and fun, and all the different age and ability levels participated as best they could. It was rewarding to see campers who had never caught a frog or been to a lake try new things.

Working at Camp Juliette Low was an educational and rewarding experience, and I recommend it to anyone looking to push themselves outside of their comfort zone and fully immerse themselves in EE. The unique woodsy setting and tent-based living provided an environment where campers and counselors live in nature while experiencing it. In my ENVS 305 class, we discussed how we often consider nature as something separate from us. Real nature is far away and involves pristine mountain ranges and big rocks. At camp, this assumption was broken down as nature became a part of these children’s daily lives. They were no longer separate, and some even made connections between the trees around their tents and the trees in their own backyards. Spontaneous teaching moments were everywhere; we identified many trees, spiders, insects, and flowers. We discussed weather patterns and mountain rocks. In my astronomy coursework, we discussed different types of stars and constellations. However, this class took place in the afternoon, so actually applying what I learned to the night sky was an additional learning experience. I had to combine the academic knowledge I gained with real life complications. Challenges like the sky not
being as dark and therefore harder to see, children who preferred talking instead of listening, and being asked questions I was not sure of the answers to taught me skills in flexibility, creativity, and confidence in addition to the science from the classroom. I continuously learned about children and their behaviors, something I had not taken a class on. The field of Environmental Education requires a unique set of knowledge and skills in the sciences as well as in understanding and handling children of all ages. I had to apply what I knew, but more importantly, I had to learn as I went and apply information as soon as I knew it.

A summer camp setting is not inherently educational and instead focuses on having fun. Because of this, I was able to work on developing and executing activities that campers enjoyed but also took advantage of the environment and any teaching moments. For example, making a fire for smores is a traditional camping activity, but I used the exercise of wood collecting to teach how to identify pine trees because they do not burn well. Another example of this is taking advantage of the naturally dark skies to teach campers about light pollution and constellations. The children are already interested in the stars because they cannot see so many at home. Because of this, they are more open to the dark skies conservation message.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work in an environment where nature is so ingrained into the daily routine, and the children visiting are taught messages about keeping nature beautiful, safe, and accessible to all.

**Week 1**

I spent the first week with campers aged 11 to 13. Most were familiar with our camp or had attended another summer camp. Because of this, the group as a whole had a comfort level with the outdoors different from most 11 to 13 year olds. This is important to keep in mind for the future. I made assumptions about the abilities of the group before they got here, so it was a learning experience for me to wait and see what the group could do and adjust my plans accordingly. This differs from my experiences
teaching EE activities in classrooms. Because of the more limited time frame and lack of flexibility in a 45 minute teaching slot, activities must have flexibility built in when classes have not covered the expected material or are ahead and need an extra challenge.

As for the campers, there were a few standouts who did not have the same connections to nature, so it was really rewarding and enjoyable to give them their first experiences with canoeing, fire building, and camping. They were cautious yet eager; they wanted to learn but took some time to warm up and step outside of their comfort zones. I also noticed that older, more experienced children were interested in connecting with those less experienced to act as guides. This age group was proud of their knowledge and wanted to show off both the skills they already had and the new things they learned.

This week, the activities included opening day rules and expectations, a paper airplane competition, a night where we cooked our dinner over the fire, playing water games and swimming, singing songs, and a paint fight. Although the main goal of every activity is fun, we always try to plan some activities that are meant to be educational and/or growing opportunities in addition to being enjoyable for the campers. The biggest learning opportunity was definitely when we cooked our own dinner. Logistically, it was a large task on the counselors end. We set up a system where campers were put into groups and rotated through stations throughout the process. We had a woodchopping station, a lashing station, a food prep station, and a fire station. We kept the previous experience levels in mind and made sure to put all of the new campers together in one group so when they got to a given station, we knew how to tailor the lessons to their abilities. I ran the fire station, and that group visited me first so I could take my time and focus on the basics and safety of fire building and management. I found one of the biggest challenges was confidence around the fire. Most of the new campers were apprehensive at best and downright afraid at worst. Lighting a match on a rock was a challenge because, despite the fact all of them had lit a match at some point in their lives, striking it on a rock felt inherently less safe to them. I could not figure out why, and this was a real learning moment for me. I base a lot of my teaching style in trying to understand students and giving extra help to some in order for everyone to succeed. Here, I struggled to do so, so I just focused on meeting them where they were and letting the most knowledgeable
camper light the fire instead of pushing the fearful ones because, ultimately, we had to get it lit and ready to start cooking to stay on schedule. I know there will be more opportunities to learn and fires to be built, so they will have another chance. I also do not want to push anyone too hard and cause a negative experience associated with fires. Obviously every child has their own strengths, weaknesses, and interests, and I need to keep this in mind in the moment when I am met with challenging behaviors.

The major activities were supplemented with smaller learning moments like how to identify trees and different types of wood, and hikes to different parts of camp including to the swimming hole and river. Some children had issues with extreme homesickness and had to leave at the end of this week. This illustrates how different comfort levels can affect how willing children are to try new things. Campers of varying ability levels can and should be accommodated, but some children were not ready for the two weeks in nature away from their families. Their situations do raise questions about why some children are better suited to camp than others. I wonder about their prior experiences, motivations for coming to camp, and expectations vs reality of living outdoors. I’m sad to lose these kiddos and hope that they can find nature based activities closer to home to continue their outdoor education.

**Week 2**

I spent this week continuing the session with the same group of campers. This was a great opportunity to watch the confidence of the children grow. Additionally, in a camp setting, unlike a classroom, the social aspect really comes into play. I used the more confident campers as a tool to guide and inspire those more unsure about a given activity. Social groups obviously occurred, so it was important to keep an eye out for anyone not participating or seeming more aloof. Connections to nature are more easily made when you feel socially safe and supported. Children were also more willing to participate and learn if others were into the activity. It’s also very important that I and my fellow counselors show enthusiasm for all activities and try to be as encouraging as possible. Because I am the Unit Leader, it is up to me not only to teach and support the kids, but the other counselors as well. I think
this is a great position for me as I try to expand my skills in EE. I find myself able to share my knowledge with people around my age, which is a learning experience in and of itself. Teaching my peers is a skill I haven’t practiced much, and it takes a whole different skill set. When teaching older people/ my peers, I find that opportunities for independence are top priority. No one likes to feel micromanaged or spoken down to, so I have been working on actively listening to the needs of the counselors I work with and not stepping in too much. I want them to learn on their own, but be completely available if they need help. I learned much more about teaching my peers this week than I thought I would.

One of the stand out activities of this week was the night where we left our unit and tents and found a spot to cook dinner and sleep outside under the stars. At camp, we refer to this as Overnight. While we had some organized activities, we also gave the children some free time to hang out at the campsite. We all worked together to set up the campsite, and I used this as an opportunity to teach the campers safe and sustainable camping practices. Examples include how to store food, where to set up the food preparation area and fire ring, and how to build and lash a latrine. When left alone, some campers sat and made friendship bracelets or talked, but others hunted for leaves, rocks, or specific trees. I thought this was interesting and made me wonder why some children gravitate more than others to being outdoors. I have no information about their previous camping experiences or home life, which are definitely factors, but I wonder what other factors could play into this. Another thing that stood out to me was the lack of fear/homesickness during the overnight experience. Generally, at least one or two campers are homesick every night, and there were multiple campers concerned about overnight during its lead up. Fears included bears, bugs and ticks, the dark, getting lost, etc. During the actual event, however, there were minimal issues. The event instead showed the campers how capable they are, and that their overwhelming fears associated with the outdoors are unfounded. Everyone enjoyed the evening.

This group of campers left on Saturday. I really enjoyed my time with them, and I am sad to see them go. I hope they carry their time at camp with them and come back next year. I know some of them won’t because two weeks in the woods in a tent was not really their “thing,” but I hope they have grown their confidence and knowledge and feel empowered to seek out more experiences in nature in the future.
Week 3

An all new group of campers arrived at the start of this week. This session, my children ranged in age from 9 to 11. At first I thought this slight age difference would not be too noticeable, but I quickly learned this was not the case. This group as a whole was less experienced, more nervous, and less willing to participate in activities. I really had to pivot my teaching style and plans to fit their comfort level while still pushing them to try new things. I found this age group liked shorter, high energy activities with guided down time. The older campers of the past two weeks found ways to explore and make their own fun during slower paced times, but this age group experienced homesickness at the drop of a hat. To combat this, we encouraged smaller independent activities like nature drawing, doing leaf rubbings, reading, and practicing songs between larger, more structured activities. At an overnight camp, we work to encourage personal growth in addition to the environmental lessons unlike a classroom where the focus is mastering the material to the set standards.

This week, we reused some of the activities from the last session and did some new ones as well. We had another cooking over the fire night, a scavenger hunt, another paper plane competition, a chance to learn about trees and types of wood, and a competition at the end for the campers to compete at different skills like woodchopping, firebuilding, and knot tying. These campers are only here for one week, so they have much less time to bond and grow. It was much more important this week to meet the campers where they were and go with the flow. The goal of this session, unlike the last one, was to focus on fun more than anything because we want campers to return next year for a two week session. I think this kind of idea is more important than I first thought. Originally, I was really focused on my job as a teacher and trying to have campers leave with as much new knowledge as possible. Now, I am realizing that if kids have positive experiences in nature early on, they will continue to seek similar experiences out
and learn along the way. Even when I worked in the EE department at Mammoth Cave National Park, we focused on having fun. Students will always have opportunities to learn in school, but they will not always have chances to run around, try new things with no repercussions, or be messy. I also find that, with this mindset and goal, I place less pressure on myself for specific outcomes. EE lacks the standardized testing and expectations of traditional school, and I want to embrace that flexibility and freedom.

Personally, I found this age group to me overall more challenging than the middle schoolers I had last week. This was unexpected because in classrooms, I liked teaching 3rd through 5th grade the best. I found it difficult to provide some of them the extra emotional support they needed at night dealing with homesickness and various anxieties. The turn out at the end of the week was also a surprise. With the older kids, all of them were in positive spirits by the end of the session and had positive things to say about their time at camp. This week, a handful of my campers had nothing positive to say and only wanted to leave. It was disappointing to see that some of the children did not develop any sort of positive connection to the environment. In fact, in the case of one particular child, she stated that camp made her hate the outdoors. This was valuable practice for me, and I hope that child can find other avenues to explore the environment in more comfortable ways.

Week 4

This week I moved to a new position with a new age group. For the rest of my time here at Camp Juliette Low, I will be working with 16 and 17 year olds and teaching them how to be future counselors. They had to apply and be accepted into the Counselor in Training (CIT) program. This role is one I’m very excited about because I am able to pass on my love for camp and education strategies I’ve developed and learned. As expected, the older teenagers have a baseline confidence level much higher than the campers I’ve been with thus far. All of them were campers for many years and want to be counselors
because of their love for the outdoors. Many CITs wanted to pass their environmental experience forward and inspire the next girls coming up to enjoy being outside.

By this age, the CITs were less interested in individual rocks, trees, etc and more interested in blazing new trails to find little known places in camp. This level of independence and self-discovery is typical for the age. They are focused on being leaders and learning not for their own benefit, but so they can be teachers for the younger campers.

The activities I helped plan focused mostly on the CITs bonding with each other and learning more advanced outdoor living skills. At the beginning of the week, we reviewed fire building, wood chopping, knot tying, and lashing. All CITs had to show proficiency in the skills which helped build confidence with wilderness/camping techniques. The CIT program is split into two years, so the 2nd years showed the newer CITs how to complete these skills. I loved seeing their confidence with teaching and living outdoors. As a counselor for the younger campers, I focused more on teaching an appreciation for the outdoors than as a CIT director. While I still have the goal of grasping teachable moments and spreading my love for the outdoors, most of my lessons are oriented more towards how to be a good counselor, with building a positive connection to the outdoors taking more of a backseat. I do, however, continue to point out tree species, ecosystem facts I learned in ecology, and suggest to CITs how they can apply this knowledge.

Week 5

The CITs continue to do well, and this week, since the girls have gotten their footing, I started sharing some of the EE skills I had learned. For example, I taught the CITs about the differences between age groups and their comfort levels, about how to combine fun with learning in the outdoors. Although I am not an expert, I still feel it is important to share the information I do have. I am also keeping in mind what I have learned about teaching teenagers, so I am still applying my skills as an educator. I am learning while I teach, which I know is very important to do as a teacher in any field, environmental education included.
The week started with the CITs using their fire skills to cook brownies in orange peels. Although the end result was not particularly appetizing, it was very encouraging to see how self-sufficient the girls are and how well they are working together. Their comfort with fire shows that, over years of being campers, they have been well educated by their counselors and given plenty of opportunities to practice. I pointed this out and hope they keep this in mind when they are counselors themselves.

Another standout activity this week was CIT overnight. As previously mentioned, during overnight, campers go to a remote spot in camp, build a fire, cook dinner, sleep under the stars, and cook breakfast before returning to main camp. During their overnight stay, the CITs were completely self-sufficient and in charge of running the entire thing with little to no help except in an emergency. No campers come to CIT overnight, so the girls have a chance to work through everything together and make mistakes. This activity is a great example of a really hands on EE experience and a true challenge. While being a counselor to the younger campers, I focused on making sure the girls found comfort in being outdoors. Extra challenges were often not necessary because just being outside without their parents was challenging enough. The CITs needed the extra hurdles to feel accomplished. They also encountered a non venomous snake, and I took the opportunity to teach them about snake identification, and what to do if you encounter dangerous creatures both by yourself and with a group. Overall, overnight was not easy, but it was a great learning experience and I am proud of how the CITs tackled their hurdles with good attitudes.

Later in the week, we held a competition where the girls were split into two teams and had to clear an area, build a fire ring, start a fire, cook bacon and eggs, extinguish, and leave no trace. I loved seeing how much the CITs have grown already, and their food was delicious. I loved this activity because it combined typical, indoor skills of cooking breakfast with an outdoor setting. This made the activity feel really approachable for the CITs. I want to keep this in mind for the future and develop more activities that put an outdoorsy spin on daily tasks. In a classroom, this concept would be kind of a guiding goal. For example, students could go outside and find items to build something they could use in their daily lives. This activity is similar to the frog boat building competition I held last month, but students are
instead using their resources to make more practical items. We could also teach reusing and recycling by challenging students to take a pile of cleaned recyclable items and build instruments/robots/art/etc. This type of activity mixes fun and creative thinking with lessons on reusing instead of throwing things out immediately. Overall a great and educational week, and I am looking forward to seeing what else the CITs and I can learn together.

**Week 6**

While the CITs stay at camp for 3 weeks to a month, the regular campers arrived for a new, two week session starting this week. Meanwhile, the youngest group of campers have Mini Camp and only stay for the first week. A new batch of little campers will arrive next week. This week is extremely fast paced. All of the 1st year CITs and many of the 2nd years leave at the end of this week, so any final guidance, evaluating, and teaching must be done this week. Throughout their time at camp, CITs must complete notebooks full of activities and assignments related to being a counselor and self reflection. Those notebooks were due Tuesday of this week. Because of this, much of my time was taken up by grading and writing evaluations. While I would rather be out with the campers and CITs, this was a really eye opening experience for me. Through the notebooks, I was able to see how effective my and the other CIT directors’ teaching was. Instead of guessing how lessons went and if my messages got across, I could see in the CITs’ reflections which ideas really stuck, which I should have emphasized more, and which styles of lessons worked the best. For example, the CITs had to plan and execute multiple activities. They did best when given lecture style instruction followed by time to work with opportunities for questions. This way, they could plan together and immediately have a sounding board when uncertainties popped up. I also liked this style because I could listen to their conversations and pinpoint misconceptions and correct them. Lessons that focused on completing a worksheet were the least effective because CITs focused more on the end goal of completing the assignment instead of the learning process and application. Being a CIT Director more closely aligns with being a teacher than being a counselor. I had opportunities where teaching was my main focus instead of being a secondary goal to having fun. I still wanted the CITs to
have a good time, but there were times when I was more focused on getting information across and lessons were less engaging. This was a perfect opportunity to test out my ideas from last month about fun and enjoyment being a priority. The CITs had to learn what we covered, but lessons that were hands on and fun were obviously much more engaging. In the future, I need to focus more on how I teach instead of just making sure everything gets across. If I were in a typical EE position where I have the opportunity to teach the same lesson multiple times, I would have had chances to fine tune my delivery and style, but here, something new needs to get done every single day.

This week, we also enlisted the help of other experienced counselors to do a sort of “ask me anything” style panel. I love this idea, and would love to use it in the future. It would be a neat idea for all age groups to hear from experienced professionals about their favorite outdoorsy topics. For younger students, they could write their questions ahead of time and the teacher could pick the best ones to guide conversation and keep everyone on track. Older students would have more freedom to guide conversation in whichever directions sparked their interests. Because the rest of the week was spent grading and evaluating, there were no other big, noteworthy activities. I was really sad to see most of the CITs go at the end of the week.

Week 7

I spent this with a handful of the 2nd year CITs who chose to stay an extra week to learn more about camp operations. They spent most of their time with their units of campers and not with us, and this was the last week of camp for the summer, so I spent much of this week tying up loose ends. In terms of teaching, this week was extremely self directed for the CITs. We asked them what they wanted to learn, which experiences they wanted, and which teaching styles they preferred. They were in charge of leading many activities with the campers, so most of their questions revolved around little specific situations that were not broad enough to need a whole lesson. I taught with a style similar to when I taught my peers last
month. I stepped back, answered questions, and did not hover. The CITs who stayed this week were 17 and needed independence and experiential learning with in the moment corrections and tips.

Later in the week, I lent a hand with the youngest campers as they tried their hand at cooking their own dinner over the fire. It was great to go back and spend time with the campers. I had to completely switch headspaces and approaches. These campers were almost all 7 years old, the youngest I had helped all summer. With this age, it is important to repeat instructions multiple times, establish expectations for any activity early, and stay lighthearted. These girls were definitely a handful, but their enthusiasm was infectious. They had so much to learn, so teaching them felt very productive. I liked going back to the basics of all the skills CITs already knew well.

By the end of this week, everything packed up, campers and CITs went home, and camp closed for the season. It was a successful summer of learning and fun.

Campers practice fire skills by making breakfast over the fire.
Younger campers learn to canoe, many for the first time.

Campers learn how to lash in preparation to build a latrine during Overnight.
To Whom It May Concern:

Camp Juliette Low has employed Sydney Gaylor for several summers as a counselor, unit leader, and assistant Counselor-in-Training (CIT) director. In addition, she was a camper for numerous years and a CIT for two. We are a residential camp for girls ages 8-17 with the traditional camp activities. This summer, Sydney acted as unit leader for the second youngest camper unit for two sessions and then moved into the assistant CIT Director position for the rest of the summer.

As a unit leader, Sydney was responsible for the 28 girls in her unit as well as the three to four other counselors in the unit. Sydney was responsible for the coordination of everyone and did this through cooperatively working with her counselors, dividing up the unit tasks each day and communicating needs from the administration to her counselors as well as the other way around. Along with the other unit counselors, Sydney was responsible for the programming for the unit – what was done during unit times, recreation times, and unit evening programs. She got high marks from her fellow counselors for her excellent communication, organization, and work ethic.

She assisted in the challenge course classes each morning. These campers spent 5-6 classes learning to work together, developing group trust, and awareness of their environment before moving down to the challenge course – low and high ropes – for the last 2-3 days. The course is designed to help the campers develop problem solving and risk-taking skills as well as promoting teamwork. It is not just an fun activity, the girls learn a way of doing. Sydney was instrumental to this program this summer.

The second half of the summer, Sydney served as Assistant Counselor-in-Training (CIT) Director. This was her first summer in this role. She had an advantage as many of the CITs were her campers last summer when she was a unit leader in the oldest camper unit. The two-year CIT program provides outdoor leadership training to 16- and 17-year-olds. CITs are provided the skills necessary to one day serve as counselors and program leaders. The responsibility and leadership skills acquired during the CIT program are the qualities that serve girls throughout their lifetime. Sydney was responsible for this training. There were 22 girls participating in either the first year or second year program. The CIT Directors met daily with the CITs following a curriculum that they arranged to best fit the schedule for the second half of the summer. Sydney interacted with the CITs in their morning CIT class, she observed her CITs helping in camper classes and in their assigned camper units. She read written reflections each day and provided encouragement. She provided valuable feedback, both formal and informal, which nudged the CITs to improve their campcraft, teaching, and counseling skills.

Sydney is an asset to the campers and CITs she interacts with each day, and we would rehire her at Camp Juliette Low. Her counseling experience is invaluable, and she is always more than willing to help others become better persons through her words and deeds.

Sincerely,

[Nancy Brim, NBCT]
Director, Camp Juliette Low