

THE HONORABLE MENTION

MENTIONING WESTMINSTER HONORABLES SINCE 2002



Connie Etter (She/Her), assistant professor in the Honors college and Justice Studies program
Photo courtesy of Brent Olson

Outdoor environment as a source of mental support and motivation

BY VANESSA EVELETH

Daily time spent outdoors was disrupted by the arrival of COVID-19 for Connie Etter, an assistant professor in the Honors college and Justice Studies program.

“It’s actually more effort making time to be outdoors in a pandemic,” said Etter.

Yet time in an outdoor space is necessary for Etter’s mental health. Crabbiness, a lack of motivation, and a “gross sensation” are what Etter experiences when she has not connected to the natural world in a while.

“I am not the same person if I’m not active, like in my body, and active outside,” Etter said, who will cycle up to 200 miles a day as an ultra-endurance sport.

As a professor, Etter said that students and educators are expected to be highly attentive, but that constant state of concentration is difficult to maintain. A bike ride, a walk

around the block, or a stroll through campus are small pauses from being attentive.

“Yeah, they’re breaks,” Etter said, “but I’m still thinking kind of in a meditative way. I can go back to the classwork and dive into [work] with more energy and more focus because I’ve had some time [to recharge].”

First-year communication major Mikey O’Hearn has spent more time outside since the pandemic began. But he said that his first year at Westminster may be a contributing factor.

“I came from New Jersey, which, obviously we hung out outdoors,” O’Hearn said. “But Utah’s much more of an outdoor state with so much more to do outdoors.”

For O’Hearn, the outdoors is “something magical,” and part of the magic is that it increases a person’s motivation.

“Whatever you’re doing [outdoors], you’re very focused on

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it and that's what you are doing," O'Hearn said. "It allows you to be more present then, and you strive to be more present in the future as well."

Etter said that being outdoors helps one to slow down and be more present.

"[I]n academic studies, there's a certain way of thinking that often gets privileged," Etter said. "It's about being a fast thinker, being a loud thinker, that's contributing all the time."

Fast-paced thinking, according to Etter, misconstrues what critical and analytical thinking looks like.

"It's about wandering. It's about observing and discovering. It's about feeling things," Etter said.

Etter's walk to and from campus (and time outdoors) allows her to refocus her thoughts about the world.

"I appreciate [being outside] as a way of reminding myself that thinking and being an engaged person in the world can be slower," Etter said. "It can be more exploratory than what I spend a lot of my time doing inside of the classroom."

The outdoor nature of Utah has given O'Hearn more

opportunities to explore, create happy moments, and hang out with friends.

"My best memories, moments, laughs, and jokes took place [during] very specific outdoor things," O'Hearn said.

The Outdoor Experience, a program for incoming first-year students, is a favorite memory of O'Hearn's. Participants spend four days before orientation exploring the Uinta Mountains by hiking, rock climbing, and paddling.

"There was so much happiness in that trip," O'Hearn said. "A big part of that was because we were outside just adventuring life. We just were camping the Uinta Mountains and we were all together. There were no distractions. And the person you were with was who you were with."

O'Hearn advised peers to support themselves with happiness.

"Fill your life with whatever makes you happy," O'Hearn said. "Give yourself some experience. Test the limits. If you haven't gone climbing before, try climbing because you just never know—Maybe you'll fall in love with it." *H.M.*