

An Unforgettable Start

Vandal Ventures | Excursions in Friendship



Vandal Ventures: Excursions in Friendship

Vandal Ventures outdoor orientation program helps incoming freshman make connections and discover Idaho's breathtaking scenery — before move-in day.

Outdoor Orientation Program Sets Stage for Joining Vandal Family

Many freshmen can attest to feeling full of trepidation upon encountering a sea of unfamiliar faces their first day on campus.

But when that first college experience is an adventure on a well-known Idaho river with a small group of future classmates, it's a different story.

"After we conquered the biggest rapids and stopped for lunch, one student sprinted down a steep hill and jumped into the water," freshman Jared Sherman said. "It looked like so much fun that every one of us did the same."

Sherman, from Rathdrum, was among 24 students who participated over Summer 2021 in [Vandal Ventures](#), University of Idaho's outdoor orientation program for first-year students. Options included either a 116-mile whitewater rafting adventure on the Lower Salmon River or a 15-mile backpacking trip in the Rapid River Drainage near the Seven Devils Mountains.

"The experience was an incredible icebreaker to develop connections, and I learned that some of the other students also live in the same wing of Wallace Hall as me so that was awesome," said the business major.

Get Involved

Student Life

Student Involvement

Recreation and Wellbeing



Building a Foundation for Future Success

U of I's [Outdoor Program](#) created Vandal Ventures to help incoming freshman forge connections that could endure throughout their college experience, set the tone for being a part of the Vandal Family and discover Idaho's breathtaking scenery.

The average freshman enters college with two friends. That number rises to 12 for those who participate in an outdoors orientation program, said Sandra Townsend, assistant director of the Outdoor Program.

"Vandal Ventures really helps with the 'lunch table syndrome,'" she said. "It keeps the loneliness factor down."

During the trip, staff members lead morning and nightly group discussions about how academic goals can relate to the university's themes of respect, sustainability, integrity, perseverance and excellence. The team's leaders intend to set the stage for the students' college years.

“”

Vandal Ventures really helps with the 'lunch table syndrome.' It keeps the loneliness factor down.

— Sandra Townsend, U of I Outdoor Program

"These discussions are powerful because they help students think about the university's values and what it means to transition into college," Townsend said. "What better way to bridge that gap coming into college than to do it with a mountaintop sunset as a backdrop for a conversation after dinner."

Research shows a ripple effect when students engage in leadership, self-discovery and team-building activities like Vandal Ventures. They are more apt to go on to the second year at higher rates and develop strong relationships, Townsend said.

“Many of the discussions encouraged us to view this transition in our lives as an opportunity for personal growth and success, and each discussion got deeper and more personal to each participant,” said transfer student Anika Baker, who is from Monterey, California. “I was comforted with the fact that I would be attending a university that takes time to discuss our personal lives and well-being.”



Twenty-four students participated over Summer 2021 in Vandal Ventures, University of Idaho's outdoor orientation program for first-year students.

Joel Beasley, who is from Sterling, Virginia, and majoring in wildlife resources, chose the backpacking trip and appreciated the opportunity to have an outdoor adventure in the state. He attended [Uldaho Bound](#) on the same trip.

“It was great hanging out with people who are in the same situation, and I could get a lot of my questions about the university answered by the trip leaders,” he said. “Being more informed changed how I feel about college.”



Bonding Over Shared Adventures

Each trip creates situations where students work, live and laugh together. Whether chatting and telling tales around campfires, setting up camp, battling Class III rapids or packing for a week in the backcountry, students end up making friends with the Vandal beside them.

Beasley discovered he has classes with some students who were on the trip.

“I hope to stay in touch with them,” he said. “Having a sense of community is important to me because it means I’ll have people to turn to when I am having troubles. I think college will be more fun if I know more people.”

Sherman keeps in touch online with some of the students who were on the trip.

“I only knew one person going into college, but after the trip, I felt as if I knew everybody,” he said.

Sherman also got his first taste of being part of the Vandal Family on the rafting trip.

“People would notice the ‘UIOP’ [University of Idaho Outdoor Program] on the sides of our boats and yell, ‘Go Vandals,’” Sherman said. “The support of the community outside the campus and how active alumni are is testament to how strong the Vandal community is. It is incredible to see how much the community can make a school experience so much better and worthwhile.”

Sherman said he chose U of I because it’s “a small college town with a lot of energy and opportunities that will help me in the future.” Vandal Ventures proved to be a fulfilling, adventurous first chapter.



Students rafted the Lower Salmon River or backpacked in the Rapid River Drainage near the Seven Devils Mountains.

“”

Having a sense of community is important to me, because it means I'll have people to turn to when I am having troubles.

— Joel Beasley, freshman

“Going into this trip, I was about 40% excited for school and 60% scared. The thought of a new school, new state, all new people, new classes? Terrifying,” said Baker, who is now a junior majoring in environmental science and sociology. “After six days of getting to know these people and exploring the Lower Salmon River, I was pretty much 100% excited for move-in day.”

The trip opened other opportunities for Baker, who has become a trip leader with the Outdoor Program and will lead future Vandal Ventures excursions. She even works with some of her original raft mates.

“I was able to attend my first day of classes with a positive mindset and confidence that I am right where I'm supposed to be — and that is all thanks to the Vandal Venture trip for being an awesome first impression for the U of I.”

Article by Brian Walker, University Communications and Marketing

Photography by [Will Knecht](#), University Communications and Marketing

Published November 2021.