

Field. A large tract of open country. Or of the coasts and the sea.

Williams-Mystic has long explored what's Out There. Since our first semester, Williams-Mystic students have gone to sea. In the fall of 1990, we decided to set more sail, as it were, and began what was to be a 14-year period of visits to the island of Nantucket, hosted for most of those years by Wes Tiffney, who passed away in 2003, and Susan Beegel, who taught Literature of the Sea for several years. Experiencing a unique island culture with deep historical, scientific, literary and policy ramifications proved to be a valuable supplement to our curriculum.

About the same time that Nantucket was launched (well, the island remains in the same place, albeit shrinking steadily), we began contemplating an even broader field platform—a way to begin to compare the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, and to seek the threads that bind across and between oceans.

But how to do this? The semester was 16 weeks, and we risked decreasing our residency time at the world's greatest maritime museum even more. So we launched an experimental 17-week semester, and we went west. There would be no less time at Mystic Seaport, and we would learn if going west would complement our academic curriculum sufficiently to justify adding a third field seminar. Twenty-two students, as well as faculty and staff, boarded a plane in Providence at 10:18 a.m. on Saturday, October 29, 1994, for our first flight to San Francisco.

We met with uncommon success, unexpected for a trial run. We explored the California coast and found much to compare and contrast with the North Atlantic. In the spring of 1995, Williams-Mystic then voyaged to the Pacific Northwest, to understand the history, policy, science and literature of the Washington and Oregon coasts.

All went well, we tuned and honed, and in fall 2006 we completed our 25th trip to the Pacific.

In the spring of 2004, we ended our 23rd visit to Nantucket. Our gracious and knowledgeable hosts Wes and Susan had moved to Maine the year before, and we had begun to discuss a broader-than-New England menu and venue. As we now umbrellaed the Atlantic and Pacific shores, it made sense to consider a coastal trilogy, and thus the Gulf of Mexico called.

In the fall of 2004, we headed south to the Mississippi River Delta. We completed our fifth trip to Louisiana this past fall, having skipped the fall of 2005 while recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was underway. In October 2005 we put our toes into Chesapeake Bay, to see how a mid-Atlantic field seminar might shape up; it proved to be a very satisfactory but temporary “stand in” for Louisiana.

So this spring we have spent 11 days in the Straits of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, nine days in the Pacific Northwest and four days in Louisiana. Students now spend four fewer days in Mystic than [they did] from 1977 to 1990. In the “Big Picture,” we judge that what we have gained from having students see and touch and smell and listen to the Pacific Coast and Louisiana has been a more than acceptable trade-off.

What do we gain in these field seminars? For those of you who follow 21st-century college-level discussions on these matters, the concept of “experiential education” has become prominent on the stage. We were very pleased when Williams President Morton Schapiro devoted an editorial in the Williams alumni magazine to emphasizing that Williams-Mystic had long provided a model for such concepts.

What we gain, beyond the “hands on,” is a profound sense of how human history has shaped the environment of American coasts, and how the environment has shaped our history. We see and study the animals and plants that are iconic in each region, and we learn what geological forces have led to such remarkably different coast-



lines. We read the prose and poetry of New England, the Louisiana bayou and the California bays and beaches. We learn why it is that you can—or cannot—stand on the shore and breathe the ocean air across the face of America.

And we learn and do these things first hand, getting our fingernails dirty, and there's nothing—nothing—to compare with that.

Standing on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, deep in the bayou of Louisiana or on the open sandy beaches of the Atlantic coast yields both the tangible and intangible. Some of these moments are predictable, because of sight and sound. But many are not: by that unique combination of insight and inspiration, a life moment is created.

It may be that one moment when no one was looking when you dropped your backpack and pressed your whole body up against a 300-foot redwood tree, chin against the tannin-rich bark, and then looked straight up. You pressed your ear to the tree and listened to the quiet of a thousand years.

We will continue, as did Edward Abbey, to “get out there and mess around and ramble out yonder, to breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely, mysterious and awesome space.”

—Jim Carlton