

“Student Affairs Talk” • Taylor Williams, graduate assistant • Feb. 20, 2020

Q: Thank you for joining me today, Taylor. You’re a graduate assistant with Clemson Outdoor Recreation and Education, but before we get to your time at Clemson, let’s rewind a little bit. You graduated from Auburn University in Alabama with degrees in political science and government. Tell us a little about your experience at “Clemson without a lake.”

Williams: I’m originally from Montgomery, Alabama. I went right up the road to Auburn for undergrad. I studied political science, thinking that I wanted to be a lawyer. I interned at a law firm and found out it wasn’t for me. About the same time, I got involved with Auburn’s campus recreation department and more specifically its outdoor program. That’s where I really found a passion for education and experiential education through outdoor recreation. I graduated in 2017.

Q: You would assume most people get into the outdoor recreation realm have had prior interest. Before your time at Auburn, were you an outdoor adventure enthusiast or things of that nature?

Williams: Not really, honestly. I grew up going to a summer camp. We had the basic things of canoeing and hiking, but really didn’t get involved in the outdoors until my time at Auburn. Some of the friends I made through the summer camp who were also at Auburn asked if I wanted to go on a spring break trip the university was putting on to the Foothills Trail, right here in South Carolina. It was really my first time doing any significant outdoor activity. I did it and fell in love with it.

Q: You eventually made your way back to the Upstate of South Carolina in 2017, working for United Way of Greenville County. Tell me about that experience and the types of things you were doing.

Williams: When I graduated from Auburn, I knew I was going to get back to the field of outdoor recreation or environmental studies at some point. I wanted to take a year and work with a community that I would otherwise not be involved with. I signed up for AmeriCorps, which is similar to the Peace Corps. I was assigned to United Way of Greenville County, working as the volunteer coordinator of the VITA program. It stands for Volunteer Income

Tax Assistance. So, it’s very different than outdoor recreation. It was a really great experience in learning about many of the issues the Upstate faces. It was a unique way to move to a new city and find out not only a lot of the common struggles that are here, but also a lot of the great programs and communities surrounding it and how they’re addressing it.

Q: What sparked the decision to apply for graduate school here at Clemson?

Williams: By the end of my time at Auburn, I was pretty interested in going to grad school. But as an outdoor person and a planner, I like to have all the resources in front of me before I make a decision. So, I’d say by October of that year I had decided I would fund my way to go to the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education conference and try and find an assistantship.

Q: You enrolled at Clemson in August 2018. What were your initial programs of Clemson at that time, from the grad program itself to CORE?

Williams: I had heard from mentors at Auburn that Clemson had a very well-known outdoor recreation program. I was blown away immediately by the amount of reach the CORE program has. I don’t know of another program in the country that puts on as many unique trips as Clemson. The program was really exciting to be involved with. And from a graduate studies perspective, it was the first time I felt in school that it wasn’t so much about performance, but rather learning. A lot of professors cared about what I thought and wanted to fine-tune that. And that’s been one of my favorite things about graduate school, to really learn more about the philosophy behind what we do.

Q: When you arrived, the CORE program was housed at the Snow Family Outdoor Fitness and Wellness Center at what essentially amounts to a double-wide trailer. How neat has it been to see those physical changes within the program over your two years as a graduate assistant?

Williams: I came in at a really unique time as a graduate assistant. It was kind of like winning the lottery. We moved from the trailer to one of the most beautiful

buildings on campus, and I think it’s a better representation of the reach and quality of program we run. We talk about building community and culture, but we didn’t have the space outside of trips to host that community and culture. And now with the new space, we have such a better way to facilitate more of the education side of what we do on the community side.

Q: What types of things are you responsible for day-to-day as the graduate assistant for CORE?

Williams: I’m in charge of the trip program. My week is spent getting ready for the 3-4 trips we run every weekend. I facilitate getting all the necessary gear, forms, reservations, equipment, food and communication out to all of our participants. And I make sure all of our student staff is ready to go for the weekend.

Q: What’s it been like working with the Campus Recreation team? Specifically, I know you work closely with Austin Souto and Robert Taylor — what have they meant to you as supervisors?

Williams: I think being a part of the team is a really unique focus on fitness and wellness. The outdoor portion of it is such a big part of wellness. Getting away from technology and letting people really connect with one another and with nature. We play a unique role in the bigger picture, just seeing the ways we can collaborate with fitness, events, intramurals. We are just one part of the puzzle, but it’s a different perspective I didn’t really get in undergrad. As far as my supervisors go, Austin and Robert are two of the best. Austin is also a student, so when things are overwhelming he provides a great example of what it’s like to work, study and have a life as well. Robert is a well-known name in our little field. He’s gone out of his way to make me more comfortable in different areas, such as programming in whitewater — an area I wasn’t comfortable in prior to Clemson. He has a great beginner’s mindset.

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Q: Speaking of Robert, the two of you recently presented to a group of staff members in Student Affairs about the way CORE is impacting student learning. Much of that focus was experiential education — in service meetings, clinics, conferences, etc. How have you found that to be effective in terms of the work you do?

Williams: The in-service meeting is something that’s new. What was previously done was a 7 a.m. meeting every other Wednesday. Because of some students having to leave early for classes, we found out we weren’t quite getting the level of professional development we wanted for our students. We switched to a monthly, two-hour in-service meeting. We bring in people from the community. This past week, for example, we had two researchers from the life sciences department come in and talk to us about snakes and what happens if you’re bitten by one and the importance they have. That’s something a lot of people on our trips are worried about; what happens when they encounter wildlife. The more we can educate them and give them tools to respond, making sure they feel safe, they can have a better overall time.

Q: We’re recording this podcast in the Andy Quattlebaum Outdoor Education Center. We held a wonderful naming ceremony for the facility last month. What did it mean to you personally to take part in that kind of celebration?

Williams: It was probably my favorite thing to be a part of. To have this facility hold a name that represents the work that we do and be reminded of the impact we can have is unique. We see it every day when our students struggle to balance work, life and school. It’s so nice to have this space where students can come out and relax and sit outside and do homework. We’ve already started to see that. It reminds us that we’re facilitating community and connection to one another.

Q: In your mind, what are some of the next developments for the CORE program or areas further down the road that we could see for outdoor recreation in general.

Williams: What we’ve started this semester and will continue to grow is our educational clinic. We’ve provided them to the

community. This past weekend, we had a knot-tying clinic and seven members of the community came on a Sunday afternoon for two hours. They had all sorts of reasons for why they wanted to learn tying different knots, but it allowed us to connect with people who may have a barrier to some of our trips — whether it’s financial reason or because of time. It’s a free, two-hour clinic. The education and empowerment we’re going to see through that is an area of growth we’ll see a lot out of in the future.

Q: I think you’re on track to graduate this spring. Your two-year assistantship is rapidly approaching its end, so what is next on your wish-list?

Williams: I’ve started moving into that transition and have taken a position in Greenville with REI, which stands for Recreation Equipment, Inc. I’m outfitting people there for adventures and will slowly start getting into the teaching side of it for their classes. I’ll be right up the road doing pretty much the same thing I’ve been doing, but for the greater community.

Q: You’re also a recent newlywed. When you do get time away from work or school, what sort of things do you enjoy doing?

Williams: I love going on hikes with my dog. My husband and I love to go bike riding and we’re excited about a few races we’ve signed up for. Most of our time is spent training for that.

Q: What kind of dog do you have?

Williams: We have a mastiff and pit bull mix named Champ and he’s about 90 pounds. He’s the best!