



News Release

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Exciting mix of outdoor recreation activities planned for first winter/spring offering of NMCC “Discover Aroostook” course

Aroostook County - Snowshoeing, skiing and ice fishing are among the activities participants enrolled in the Northern Maine Community College inaugural spring semester Discover Aroostook course will engage in as they learn about the numerous recreation and cultural opportunities available in the County during the winter and spring months.

On the heels of a successful first-time offering of the adventure-based course this fall, NMCC officials are looking ahead to the coming semester and a new set of seasonally appropriate field experience opportunities that introduce students to The County through many unique, hands-on learning activities.

Outings planned for participants enrolling in the course, which begins on Thursday, January 18, and meets regularly through May, include ice fishing on a local lake, snowshoeing and Alpine, cross-country and backcountry skiing at some of the best spots in the County for outdoor activities. Students will also learn about and experience the Can-Am Sled Dog Races in Fort Kent and later in the semester will visit a local maple syrup farm during tapping season and canoe on area lakes and rivers.

“I think it is safe to say that this past semester was just as much of a learning experience for the instructors as it was for the students. The students have challenged us to expand our notions of ‘outings’ to include experiences like skeet shooting and ice fishing. Likewise, we have been able to introduce students to experiences they can participate in from almost anywhere, such as geocaching, long after the traditional semester ends,” said Dawn McPherson, lead course instructor. “The quality of guest speakers for the class has been phenomenal and has helped all of us realize the ‘quality’ of life and the resources available in The County. Given the amount of recent development in the area of outdoor winter recreation opportunities in the region in recent years, we are looking forward to an exciting new semester of Discover Aroostook.”

The primary goal in developing the course was to introduce students to Northernmost Maine and enable them to better understand and appreciate the outdoor environment in, and culture of, Aroostook County. College officials also see the class as a tool to help curbing out-migration from the region.

In the upcoming spring session as in the fall session, field trips follow classroom lectures, assigned readings or some other introductory activities to help students gain as much understanding about what they experience. In addition, students are required to keep updated entries in a reflective journal and document, through photography and videography, their experience for a final semester public presentation on their learning experience.

Once completed it is expected students will have: explored a variety of outdoor adventure experiences; developed of an awareness of and appreciation for environmental responsibilities and ethics; practiced and applied skills learned in the classroom and the field; learned the value, meaning and benefits of leisure in life, especially as it relates to the out of doors in Aroostook County; gained a better appreciation for the history of the region and its unique lore; and demonstrated respect for the communities visited.

“We want to challenge the myth held by some students who attend the College, both from within and outside of Aroostook County, that there is nothing to do here,” said William Egeler, dean of students. “That is especially true in the area during the winter months, when the opportunities to enjoy the season are seemingly limitless.”

It is that misconception of the area by locals that was recently cited by developers of a proposed four-season resort in the region as an area of concern that needed to be addressed. Egeler also refers to a 2004 report titled “Migration and Youth Migration from Aroostook County”, prepared by economists Charles Colgan and Bruce Andrews, which revealed factors influencing student decisions to live in Aroostook County after graduation.

“Not surprisingly, the report cites that students who chose to live in Aroostook County after graduation listed a preference for the recreation and culture in Aroostook County as the most significant reasons for staying in the County behind only closeness to family and cost of living. By exposing our students to the myriad of opportunities available to them here in Northern Maine, we believe they will in turn appreciate the region to a greater extent and be more likely to elect to make a living here in The County,” said Egeler.

In addition to supporting local initiatives to curb out-migration and grow the economy of the region, NMCC officials also see the course and the spirit of engagement fostered between student, College and Aroostook community as a factor that will result in an increased graduation rate.

The College success rate, which is tracked regularly, currently hovers around 60 percent, which is significantly better than national figures for community colleges, but allows room for growth at the Aroostook County College. Students deemed to have “successfully completed” their study at NMCC have graduated within a three-year time frame, are still enrolled, or have transferred to a four-year college.

“A goal of NMCC’s adventure-based learning class Discover Aroostook is to reach a large body of students who are not ‘at risk’ academically, but who statistics indicate are not progressing through their academic program to degree completion. We want to reach those students who do not necessarily stand out as having academic deficiencies or low motivation, but who are, nonetheless, ending their college experience prematurely,” said Egeler.

The unique nature of the course, its objectives and goals have attracted support from outside the college in the form of grant monies through the Maine Community Foundation, which has awarded the College nearly \$15,000 through three separate funds to support the initiative. Support from the MCF both for the course and to assist with related transportation expenses was awarded through the Gauvin Family Lighthouse Fund, the Saxifrage Fund and the Aroostook County Fund this fall.

A lion's share of the funding was awarded by the Lighthouse Fund, which has been established by Raynold and Sandra Gauvin, lifelong residents of Central Aroostook, to assist in community efforts to enhance the work ethic and quality of life in the region. Among the stated goals of the fund are to provide assistance for projects seeking to apply community strengths to help solve some of the region's problems.

Both the Gauvins and representatives of the Maine Community Foundation and Aroostook County Fund hope their generous contributions will not only benefit students participating in the program, but will also help the College leverage additional funds from other organizations.

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