
SARAH WALKER – TEACHING STATEMENT

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I believe the goal of higher education is to develop critical thinkers who leave post-secondary institutions with the ability to solve complex, real-world problems. As a natural resource educator, I also believe we have a responsibility to nurture our student's environmental ethic and provide them with the skills and knowledge to build a more sustainable and equitable society. To help reach these goals, I rely on applied and experiential teaching strategies to encourage students to think critically in the classroom. A foundational component to this approach is a classroom environment based on inclusion and equity where students feel welcome, safe, and comfortable enough to take the necessary cognitive and social risks that enable learning.

Learning is a cyclical process. It happens when students have the opportunity to (1) understand a concept, (2) test that concept in an applied setting, (3) reflect on their experience and adapt their mental model and (4) apply said adapted model. This cycle shapes how I teach - it informs the way I design entire courses, modules within a course, and individual class sessions.

Over the last few years, I have delivered an incredibly diverse set of course work. Since 2020, I have been the primary instructor on seven different courses here at CSU, three of which I have personally designed. I have also designed an additional four courses to be taught by other CSU instructors in our college. While these courses have had diverse foci - everything from research methods to conflict management to recreation, health and well-being - experiential education, participatory learning, and science literacy are common threads. In NRRT 280 – (Nature Immersion and Human Well-being), students from all over the university explore the science documenting the health and wellness benefits of nature, while simultaneously experiencing, testing, and reflecting on these benefits as they explore our Mountain Campus. In, NRRT 373 (Kenya Study Abroad Social Ecological Methods) students learn how to use mixed methods approaches to collect data and consider the ethical implications of social science research, while conducting research projects in the biodiverse and culturally rich pastoral rangelands of Northern Kenya. In the two courses I am currently redesigning and scheduled to teach for our Masters of Tourism Management program, I am using field trips and projects with collaborative partners to provide students with the opportunities to collect and analyze nature-based tourism data in their methods course (NRRT 601). We will then use that data to grow the capacity of Colorado-based recreation organizations in their applied experiential learning course later in semester (NRRT 667).

I believe my concentrated experience in course design and experiential education over the last few years makes me well suited to the teaching and programmatic component of this position. I thoroughly enjoy big picture thinking and am looking forward to applying it to program curriculum, delivery, and student recruitment. I have participated in multiple training opportunities focused on course design and know what it takes to design a high-quality course that excites students and prepares them to be critical thinkers and environmental stewards. In this

role, I would bring my enthusiasm for experiential learning, my academic expertise in human well-being and the environment, and my non-academic experience in outdoor recreation and nonprofit leadership to our students. I am an enthusiastic and dedicated teacher – both in the classroom and in the design of my courses. I am ready to apply these skills and experiences and collaborate with other faculty to hone HDNR’s programmatic focus in both our undergraduate and graduate curricula.

In addition to my training and experience in course design and experiential teaching, I am constantly working to improve how my teaching style and course formats prioritize issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Engaging fully in a learning process requires a willingness to fail. It requires students to apply partially developed mental models of a concept or issue and risk being wrong. If they are wrong, they must also be comfortable enough to adapt their mental model and try again. While I believe strongly in my participatory teaching techniques, in order for these techniques to be successful, students must feel safe, accepted and celebrated for their salient identities and experiences. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I can speak firsthand to the difference in my learning when professors practiced their commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the classroom. Teachers who explicitly practiced their commitment to an inclusive classroom climate allowed me to speak up in class without being constantly panicked about the consequences of accidentally outing myself. These were the classes in which I engaged fully with my academic potential. I am committed to creating an inclusive classroom and ensuring equity and justice are ever-present in my teaching practice. I am open and vulnerable with my students about my sexual orientation because increasing the representation of marginalized identities is a critical step forward for academia. I use the collective creation of class ground rules to directly address microaggressions or derogatory comments made by students or guests. Additionally, I strive to ensure my class readings and case-studies reflect a diversity of perspectives and cultures.

As teachers, we hold important positions as role models to our students. I take on this role humbly, with incredible respect for its potential to impact students’ academic and personal trajectory. I enthusiastically show students the connection between theory and application, supporting them to become critical thinkers that have the ability to solve complex, real-world problems. I view my primary responsibility as a teacher to facilitate an inclusive environment where students are encouraged to show up as their full selves and respectfully challenge each other’s ways of knowing the world.