

Celebrating 35 Years of Cave and Karst Outreach and Education through the WKU Karst Field Studies Program

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For a caver, it is likely that few experiences could ever rival a first cave visit. Be it the incredible delicacy of a speleothem or the immensity of a truly massive room, most can remember the first time they were struck speechless by the wonders of a cave. For many cavers, this initial awe gives way to a thirst for knowledge about these incredible and unique natural wonders. For decades, this desire for knowledge has drawn students, professionals, and cave and karst lovers from around the world to Kentucky to experience the Western Kentucky University Karst Field Studies program.

The Karst Field Studies Program (KFS) was the brainchild of Dr. Nicholas Crawford, a Western Kentucky University (WKU) Department of Geography and Geology professor and former Director of the Center of Cave and Karst Studies. In 1979, Dr. Crawford was contacted by Mammoth Cave National Park to ask if WKU would be interested in developing a summer program at the park. Many parks across the nation had summer programs with classes in such subjects as wildflower identification and park history, but Dr. Crawford was interested in a new approach. Instead of large classes with less academic focus, Dr. Crawford wished to emphasize academic quality over quantity of classes or students (Crawford, 1980; Beaty, 1981). In his model, small classes of no more than 20 students would be given intense, all-day instruction from world-renowned karst experts for one week. The focus would be on the development of fieldwork skills and experiences. Academic undergraduate or graduate credit could be received through WKU or the courses could be taken as non-credit workshops. This program, as stated by Dr. Crawford, “. . . tried to combine the best natural resources with the best educational program,” (cited in Beaty, 1981).

After a period of extensive planning, paperwork, and contacting potential instructors by Dr. Crawford and graduate assistant James Goodbar, the partnership program was created and christened the “Summer University in the Park” (Moses, 1980). In the summer of 1980, from June 9 to July 5, the first classes of this unique program were taught. An assembly of world-renowned instructors was brought in from multiple states and countries to teach classes: Karst Geomorphology with Dr. Derek Ford, Cave Ecology with Dr. Thomas Barr, Speleology with Mr. Roger Brucker, Karst Hydrology with Dr. James

Quinlan, Biogeography of Karst Regions I: Vascular Flora with Dr. H.W. Elmore, Biogeography of Karst Regions II: Fauna with Dr. Blaine Ferrell, and Karst Geology with Dr. Art Palmer (Crawford, 1980). The promise of unparalleled experiences and the undoubted star power of the incredible team of instructors drew in students from all over the United States; in one course there was only one student enrolled from Kentucky (Crawford, 1980; Scott, 1980).

In this first year, all courses were taught at Mammoth Cave National Park. In welcoming the first students to the park and their classes, park superintendent Robert Deskins said:

“I would like to welcome each of you to this experiment. For that is exactly what it is, an experiment in resource use and community involvement and an experiment in the use of a great public owned natural laboratory by an institution of higher learning. For you it means learning – learning from not only professors but from the very resource itself; and learning while being a part of this magnificent outdoor schoolroom. I sincerely hope that it is a success for both you and Western Kentucky University as well as Mammoth Cave National Park.”

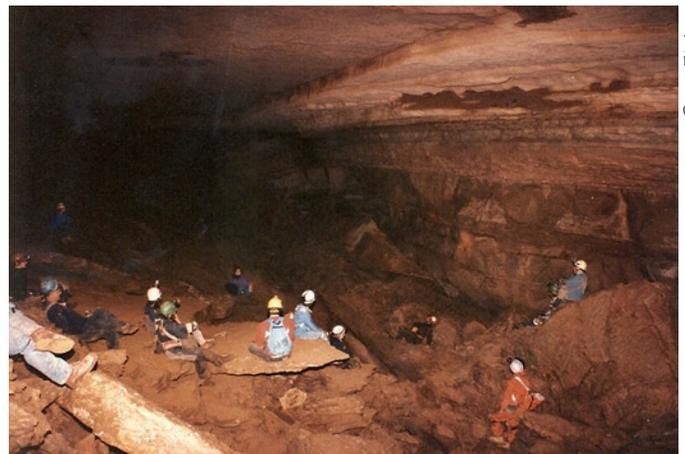
(cited in Scott, 1980)

The students partaking in this ‘experiment’ stayed at the Great Onyx campground with fellow students and instructors where they attended course lectures and prepared for their field days. Most days began with a three-hour morning lecture followed by 6- to 10-hour long trips in the cave or out in the field. Students were shown miles of cave which were typically not seen by guests. A past student recollected their foray into such fascinating areas as Echo River, Hanson’s Lost River, Collin’s Crystal Cave, Salts Cave, and Great Onyx Cave (Moses, 1980).

At this time, however, it was still considered by the park

service to be an experiment; one that Dr. Crawford hoped would work and could be held again the following year. The program more than worked; it seemed already that this program was destined to become more than just an experiment given the enthusiasm of its participants. Students said that the program was the ‘best put together field study I have ever attended’, the ‘caving and learning experience of my life’, and that they ‘never had a better, more organized and instructive course in all my college career’ (Crawford, 1980). This success and the eagerness of its students put the Summer University in the Park on a path to becoming a permanent program, one that is still enrolling students from around the world in unique karst classes 35 years later.

In 1981, the second year of the program commenced and WKU hosted the International Congress of Speleology – the first year the gathering was held in the United States (Conway, 1981). The KFS program added two new courses to its line-up: Cave Ecology with Dr. Thomas Barr and Cave Archaeology with Dr. Patty Jo Watson. Courses continued to be fieldwork-focused and full of unique experiences for its students (Crawford, 1980). This aspect of the program continued to be a draw for students. The professor of the Karst Geomorphology course that year, Dr. Paul Williams, confirmed the importance of field work: “There’s nothing like fieldwork for learning. You don’t really understand something until you’ve experienced it,” (The Observer, 1981). The fieldwork ranged from a leisurely, pleasant pace to grueling and exhausting. The most strenuous trip that year was an 8-mile long trip which took 12 hours to complete (Beaty, 1981). Though



1996 Cave Photography course taught by Mr. Charles Swedlund and Mr. Richard Zopf

Gary Fisher

one student stated that she was used to caving trips, she admitted that these were truly exhausting, though equally rewarding, experiences.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the WKU and Mammoth Cave Park partnership not only maintained, but flourished. In 1987, the name of the program changed from the Summer University in the Park to Karst Field Studies at Mammoth Cave, now known simply as Karst Field Studies. Courses and new instructors were added year-by-year. In 1983, a course titled "Historical Geography of Mammoth Cave" was developed by Dr. Stanley Sides and in 1986 it was renamed "Exploration of Mammoth Cave" (Sides, 2015). The course has been a staple of the program since its creation and promises to continue as such long into the future as new interpretations of Central Kentucky history and of the karst development of the region are better understood. Although the great original courses of the program are still regularly offered, new courses, such as Cave Archaeology, Research Methods in Cave and Karst Science, Cave Photography, and Intermediate Caving Techniques, just to name a few, have been added to the course lineup. Exploration of karst landscapes has also expanded beyond the Mammoth Cave region since the first years of the program with courses in the Ozarks and Texas, and others soon to be held in Florida and Virginia.

Though instructors and courses may have changed, the goal of KFS is still to provide students with unparalleled hands-on field experiences – a goal which has been well met, according to students. Student Chelsea Ballard, a participant in Dr. Palmer's Karst Geology course and Dr. Sides's Exploration of Mammoth Cave class, discussed her experience with the course:

"I loved that we were more hands on and we were able to go into the cave to do our field notes rather than sitting in the classroom all day.

[The courses] really opened my eyes to the karst world and the history behind Mammoth Cave. Taking Dr. Sides' Exploration of Mammoth Cave class benefited me as a cave guide at Mammoth Cave. I learned a lot of history about the Mammoth Cave region and use the information on my tours. I was also able to learn about the history of the area more because I am from Horse Cave (right outside of the park) and I was able to also learn about my family's history that used to own land on the National Park property."

(Ballard, 2015)

Not only did she find the courses academically rigorous and exciting, but she also made many lifelong friends with whom she still speaks today. She is even planning future experiences with KFS, "KFS is different from anything I have ever experienced. I will be taking another class in the future and look forward to summer 2016 class list." Ms. Ballard summed up her experience stating, "It was truly an experience of a lifetime and the best two weeks of my life." (Ballard, 2015).

Dr. Art Palmer, whose experience with the program goes back decades, was asked about his favorite moments with KFS, stating "There have actually been many, but they boil down to the same thing – students who are unsure of themselves who catch fire and find themselves going far beyond what they thought they were capable of, both physically and mentally." (Palmer, 2015).

Dr. Jason Polk, who has participated as both a student and professor, describes the program as "hands-on, immersive learning." He has found it particularly useful for improving both his research and teaching skillset.

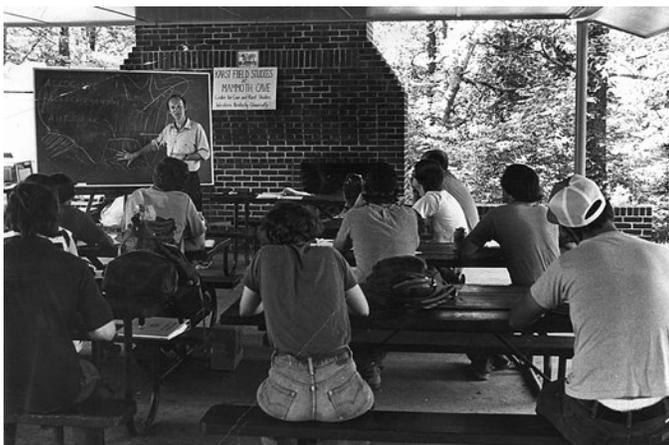
"It was invaluable having experts to teach on site and to learn in the actual setting in which I would use the

skills. It benefited me greatly in being able to improve my research and teaching by integrating my knowledge of the topics and practices, like cave survey, into my courses and research methods. It continues to benefit me each semester as I improve my skills based on the foundations learned in the KFS classes. . . the professors are simply the best in the world at what they do and how they use their passion to make the learning experience one-of-a-kind."

(Polk, 2015)

It is safe to say, after more than thirty years and countless students who have had the experience of a lifetime, that this great "experiment" in immersive learning and collaboration has accomplished its goal. When asked what the future holds for the program and why it will continue to be successful, Dr. Polk discussed why this experience is one for all curious and adventurous students:

"Everyone should take a KFS course to gain the experience of what learning from a true professional is like and to meet others from around the world who share their interests and see all the different professions and fields in which these skills are being used and becoming increasingly important. I would highly recommend KFS to anyone, even if they aren't into caves, because there are so many other positives from these courses, including how to learn in the field and how to work in teams in challenging environments. It's truly a special experience and can only be had through the WKU KFS program, which is unique in its partnerships with Mammoth Cave, Cave Research Foundation, and others to create a very collaborative and nurturing learning environment



Mike Douglas

Dr. Paul Williams and his Karst Geomorphology class (circa 1981)



1983 Karst Geology course taught by Dr. Art Palmer (photo credit unknown)

that provides real-world skills to people.”

(Polk, 2015)

In closing, for 35 years the KFS program has offered a special memory and experience for students of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities. Whether taking a course for academic credit, continuing education credit for professional development purposes, or simply for fun, each student participating in the program leaves with knowledge and experiences that are difficult to get anywhere else. Courses have evolved and diversified and instructors have changed over the years, but the KFS experience has never changed – immersive, field-based learning from truly world-renowned experts in cave and karst studies. The caving community is often seen as one that is close-knit and passionate about something that is abstract to those who are inexperienced in the wonders and mysteries of caves and karst landscapes. This stems in part from the bond created through exploring and learning about some of the last remaining untouched frontiers on the planet- we like to think that the KFS program offers an opportunity for anyone to try this experience and, just as Dr. Crawford envisioned many decades ago, find a passion for the unknown through a high-quality educational activity. To learn more about the WKU Karst Field Studies Program or the 2016 summer course offerings, please visit the Karst Field Studies Web site at karstfieldstudies.com/.

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