On October 5th, 2017, ten students from Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy’s Outdoor Explorations class came out to Elden Horse Camp to assist in the reroute of the Deer Hill Trail.

Deer Hill Trail, which runs low on the eastern side of the San Francisco Peaks was a trail with questionable sustainability in the first place. Though it’s low angle locations means no huge hills to contend with, the trail was built across multiple drainages using a fall line strategy across the entire length. Straight up, straight down over and over. In the aftermath of the Schultz Fire and subsequent flooding in 2010, this trail has become severely washed out and eroded.

Rather than attempt to repair a trail with suboptimal alignment, the Forest Service is rerouting it. This will not only retain access to this part of the forest via singletrack, but will give the new trail the best possible chance of remaining in good shape for as long as possible. This gave our students the unique opportunity to scratch in brand new trail on a shiny new alignment. They were able to study and compare the old trail, complete with steep angles, large rolling rocks and rutted tread, to the new smoother and more contoured alignment. They removed grasses and pine needles from the new tread and tamped the fresh new dirt to make it ready for traffic. Once they had completed their section, they set about convincing closing the old alignment to allow the area to revegetate and be restored.

During lunch this small group of students had the chance to speak with Coconino National Forest Recreation Planner Sean Murphy. Many of the students had questions about how trials are approved, funded and prioritized. Some expressed the common frustration of the lengthy timeline that is sometimes required to approve new trail and questioned what the harm of illegal trail building could possibly be. Mr. Murphy was the perfect person to ask. He explained the NEEPA process and all the things USFS experts would look for to approve a new trail project and ensure that a new trail will have minimal environmental and historical impact.
After completing their trail work for the day, students had an opportunity to plan and design their own micro trails using yarn. Downhill mountain bike trails were very popular with this group, and they had some pretty grand ideas for massive bike parks, lifts, and even food trucks at every trailhead. It was fun to hear their ideas and to guide them in considering which suggestions were feasible and which ones may need to be reworked.

It was a very productive day with lots of new trail built and new ideas considered.

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