

# NOLS Professional Instructor Course Information (PIC)

The National Outdoor Leadership School's Instructor Courses are designed to train experienced outdoor adventurers to be instructors at NOLS and other wilderness based outdoor education programs. While focusing on the PIC, this information sheet covers a range of topics relating to NOLS, the application and review process, and employment at NOLS. For further information on all NOLS Instructor Courses, please see our Instructor Course Information document on our website. This document is meant to give a clear picture of the process and expectations involved in applying for and taking the NOLS PIC. In addition, we recommend that you review a current course catalog to gain an understanding of our overall mission and programs.

## A Profile of NOLS

NOLS is a private non-profit school focusing on experiential education in a wilderness setting. Our international headquarters is in Lander, Wyoming, with nine branch schools located in Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, Yukon Territory, Washington, Wyoming, Mexico (Baja), Australia/New Zealand, and Chile (Patagonia.) We also have programs in Utah, New York, India, Brazil, British Columbia, Tanzania and Scandinavia. NOLS offers 70+ course types in wilderness areas worldwide for students from ages 14 to over 50. On our courses, instructors take groups of novices into remote wilderness settings for extended periods of time. In addition to student courses, we run trips for alumni, conferences and seminars on wilderness related educational topics, sponsor an extensive staff training program, conduct research and produce publications on environmental conservation, wilderness skills, risk management and leadership.

Yearly we enroll 3,000+ students and employ approximately 600 instructors and 150+ full-time and part-time administrative and support service staff. We have more than 75,000 graduates and have certified over 2000 instructors since our founding in 1965. We are actively seeking to diversify our students, instructors, and administration, and we have a scholarship program for women and minorities to directly support this goal.

## Qualifications for Applicants

**Because we expect applicants to be professional outdoor educators, admission criteria are strict.**

**The qualifications we look for in applicants include:**

- Extensive time in the field as an instructor/leader/guide with multi-day *wilderness based* outdoor education programs. By “extensive” we mean a minimum of 50 field weeks (7 field days = 1 field week), although most candidates have more than 50 professional weeks, and have extensive personal expedition experience. We only count work that has been at least one week of continuous backcountry travel towards the required 50 weeks. (A support or administrative position with an outdoor program does not add to your field weeks, although it may add depth in other areas of your resume.) We require that these weeks be verified by a supervisor at the program(s) where you worked via a letter of recommendation.
- A broad base of proven expertise in general outdoor skills utilized at NOLS (backpacking, mountain travel, wilderness camping, etc.), plus at least one additional field (utilized at NOLS) or skill in which you have extensive experience (e.g., natural history, mountaineering, rock climbing, sea kayaking, sailing, river running, etc.)
- We desire applicants with the ability to set-up and supervise a backcountry top-rope climbing site (sites to which you have not been before, at which you will need to check the cliff for appropriate routes and possible hazards, and at which you will need to build the anchors with artificial protection.)
- Significant personal experience in outdoor pursuits (i.e. non-work, non-training related private wilderness trips, expeditions, outings, etc.) NOLS wants sailing staff who are avid sailors, climbing staff who are avid climbers, paddling staff who are avid paddlers, winter program staff who are avid backcountry skiers, etc.
- Outstanding risk management record as an instructor.
- Demonstrated excellence in leadership, teaching and group dynamics.
- Experience supervising other instructors.
- Excellent physical health: most NOLS courses are out for extended periods in remote locations. Our staff need to be able to carry heavy loads, deal with strenuous travel, and be able to look after tired students during hard and long days in harsh weather.
- Current first aid certification: WFR or WEMT and CPR (the application has more detailed information.)
- Minimum age: 25

**When we review your application and resume, we will also be trying to determine whether or not you are a good match for the different programs and operating areas at NOLS. Here are questions we'll consider:**

- Why do you want to work for NOLS?
- Does your resume show you to be consistently moving into new skills areas, new responsibilities, new challenges? We want staff that are constantly learning and growing.



- Where have you worked and played and how does this match with our areas of operation? (For example, if you've only backpacked in the southeast US - even for 100+ weeks - you will not necessarily be a good match for NOLS programs in the mountains of the western US.)
- If you are a climber, do you spend most of your personal climbing time doing multi-pitch routes with traditional gear protection, or sport climbing? We want staff that do the former.
- If you are a river boater (canoe, kayak or raft), how much of your experience is on day-trips vs. multi-day trips? The more multi-day river experience you have, the better.
- If the majority of your professional resume is guiding, we want to see that there was a strong educational component to your work as a guide. NOLS is a wilderness expeditionary *school* and we teach our students more than we guide. We are interested in staff whom enjoy teaching.

## A Detailed Description Of The PIC

- The Professional Instructor Course is 16 days long. There are one and a half days in-town at both the beginning and end, and 13 days of backpacking and climbing in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming.
- The whole idea is that the PIC prepares you to work for NOLS. You and your fellow students will come with extensive prior professional outdoor education experience (at least 50 field weeks). We want all students to have a great PIC, and begin working for NOLS. We expect you to be able to begin working with NOLS at a much higher level than regular IC grads.
- The course will meet with several administrative staff during the initial in-town time to cover NOLS history, our mission, staffing office structure and methods, expectations that you can have as an employee, further staff training programs and other benefits, what NOLS is doing to promote a positive learning environment on courses, and how risk is managed institutionally at NOLS, along with other topics. You will also get an introduction to the various facilities and departments that comprise the NOLS operations in Lander.
- The PIC typically has a short base camp (4 days) at a climbing crag near the edge of the mountains at the start or end of the course. At minimum, you will cover and practice all the skills and topics involved in teaching and supervising novice students in top-rope climbing and rappelling in a backcountry setting. Ideally, there will be time to cover further climbing topics during this time, and you should expect some 3rd and 4th class climbing and snow climbing opportunities during the course. If you have a strong experience base in high angle rock climbing you will have the opportunity to have your skills assessed and time/weather permitting may be recommended for work in this course type at NOLS.
- Your pack will be heavy for several travel days: odds are that the group will not be re-rationed in the mountains, which means you will be carrying 10+ days of food when the course leaves for the field.
- Your instructors will review NOLS standards and practices in a many areas: Leave No Trace practices, river crossings, climbing, medical protocols, evacuations, bear camping, student leadership progressions, course paperwork, and feedback and evaluation concerns, etc.
- You and your fellow students will present several classes each on topic from fishing to knots to natural history to leadership and communication. We want to see you teach, and we want each student to participate in making the course content and curriculum full.
- Each student will have several leadership opportunities during daily travel or activities. We want to see you in a leadership role, and we want each student to have the chance to shape some aspect of the course.
- Many discussions started by the instructors covering NOLS practices will evolve into students sharing their perspectives and backgrounds on the same topics.
- Early on, the instructors will check in with the group and individually with each student regarding expectations, goals, anxieties, and prior experience. Individual feedback will be ongoing, and the instructors will check in various times with participants regarding how the course is progressing, and how each student is doing, etc. Each student will get a thorough oral and written evaluation at the end of the course.
- Your meals are covered from breakfast on the first day through lunch on the final day. You will get a bunk in the student dorm the night of the orientation meeting, the next night, and the night the course ends.
- Group equipment (stoves, tents, cook gear, ropes, etc) are covered by your tuition. If you choose to use other NOLS gear, rather than your own, you will not be charged for items which can be rented by "regular" students - we want to encourage you to use the gear (packs, sleeping bags, wind pants, etc) we issue to our students if you are unfamiliar with it. You are welcome to purchase gear (water bottles, sun glasses, long underwear, etc) from our outfitting department that is not available for rent.



## Common Questions

- **What determines whether I pass the PIC and am recommended for hire at NOLS?**

Your participation, performance, and evaluation. Your instructors, some of NOLS' most senior field instructors, will evaluate your performance throughout the course. Feedback is ongoing, and focuses on your ability to function as a group member and effectively lead your peers, your teaching skills, your ability to perform technical skills to acceptable standards, and your overall competence as an outdoor educator. You will receive a written evaluation covering all areas. We expect everyone who attends the PIC to pass, although this unfortunately is not always the case.

- **What are my opportunities for work after completing the PIC?**

We have transitioned to running the PIC only in May, because we often need staff to work for us in the summer. Qualified graduates with flexible summer schedules often work for NOLS in the field during the summer right after the PIC. Further staff training opportunities may also be available in the fall, winter and spring that could lead to work in other program areas (skiing, sea kayaking, sailing, rivers, etc.) in the “off-season.” Because the summer is our busiest season, we prioritize “off-season” (i.e. fall, winter and spring) work to instructors who worked for us in the summer

- **Can I apply for the PIC without paying the \$65 application fee?**

No. Due to the time involved in reviewing PIC applications, we require that applicants pay the application fee to demonstrate their commitment and intent to attend if selected.

- **Can I get a reduction in the price of the PIC?**

No. The tuition of \$300 is as low as we can afford. The PIC is already heavily subsidized by NOLS.

- **What are the wages and benefits for instructors?**

Wages are based on seniority and position. Base wages for the 2011 summer season range from \$74.00/day (training role) to \$192.00/day for our most senior staff. During the off-season base wages are slightly lower. We are slated to have another wage increase in 2012 and wage increases occur at least every other year. NOLS has a mechanism for recognizing professional experience from other schools, called “ROPE” (Recognition of Professional Experience.) Using ROPE, most PIC grads enter the NOLS pay scale at either the Intermediate level (30-59 weeks) or as Level I Senior Staff (60-99 weeks). Most PIC grads should expect to begin working at the “patrol leader” (PL) position, which has a higher level of responsibility than our entry-level “instructor” (I) position. In 2011, a patrol leader (PL) with 30-59 weeks made \$90 a day and a PL with 60-99 weeks made \$97/day. Each NOLS course is supervised by a Course Leader (CL), with one or more co-leaders working under them. As you gain experience and begin to CL—which typically does not take too long for PIC grads—your wages would increase by about \$25/day. Your wages will also increase at regular seniority intervals (Level II at 100 weeks, Level III at 150 weeks, etc.) Additionally, certain course types receive pay bumps such as sailing courses, some mountaineering courses, and our adventure courses (14-15 years old). Health insurance benefits are offered for those working a minimum of 15 weeks per year. Travel reimbursements are also offered. In addition, training opportunities, equipment prodeals, and family discounts for courses are all available.

- **Is it possible to work for NOLS in the summer only?**

Yes. Because the majority of our courses occur in the summer, there is a strong need for experienced instructors in that season. Many NOLS instructors are professionals in other jobs and are only able to work one or two courses a year in their specialty area. Others are college or graduate students. Instructors with summer only schedules are an important part of our faculty.

- **Is it possible to work for NOLS in just the fall and spring?**

No. One of the benefits of NOLS field instructing is the opportunity for year round work. We offer “Off-Season,” (i.e. outside June – August) work to instructors who also work for NOLS during the summer months. We do this to reward the employees who consistently choose to prioritize working for NOLS.

- **What are the career opportunities at NOLS?**

The employment possibilities offered by NOLS allow tremendous flexibility. A number of our instructors have maintained professional non-NOLS careers while working for NOLS as their schedule allows. Others have been at the school for years and work year-round in the field. Still others have taken opportunities for advancement at NOLS to full-time salaried positions that combine administrative and field-work, while others have developed an administrative career. Most NOLS managers and branch directors are former instructors, and over half of the full-time, in-town staff are former instructors. As you develop seniority as a field instructor, more options become available.



## The Application Process:

Obtain a PIC application packet by contacting admissions or by downloading it from the NOLS website. Complete and return it to NOLS along with a non-refundable \$65 application fee.

- 1) The application packet contains the following:
  - a) PIC Application Form (2 pages)
  - b) A detailed questionnaire, which we ask that you answer on separate paper. We also ask that you send us an outdoor resume.
  - c) Three Letters of Recommendation for you to distribute. One must be from your primary supervisor at the program where the majority of your work in outdoor education has taken place, one from any other supervisor of yours in outdoor education, and one from a co-worker. We encourage you to follow up on these letters with their writers; it is your responsibility to make sure they have been sent to us.
- 2) You must also send in a photocopy of your first aid and CPR certifications before we will review your application.
- 3) We then review your application and notify you of our decision. Based on this process, we decide who is offered enrollment, and who is offered a spot on the wait list. If we feel that you are not qualified for the PIC, we will discuss the possibility of you taking a regular IC, as well as the possibility of receiving a scholarship to participate in that course.
- 4) Once you have been offered enrollment, you will be mailed an enrollment packet. The tuition of \$300 is due 14 days after you receive your enrollment packet. After receiving your tuition, we will send you a comprehensive PIC information packet that includes NOLS textbooks and field staff notebooks.
- 5) Once paid, your tuition of \$300 will be subject to the regular NOLS cancellation policies for tuition: for cancellation between 15 and 29 days prior to the course start date NOLS will retain 25%; for cancellation between 8 and 14 days prior NOLS will retain 50%; for cancellation less than 8 days prior to the course start date there will be no refund.

Applications for the PIC are reviewed beginning December 1<sup>st</sup>, the winter before the PIC. Applicants will be notified by mail by January 30<sup>th</sup> of their application status. After this date, any additional space on the PIC will be filled on a rolling basis.

### Questions?

**For general info about NOLS, the various ICs, the PIC, catalog requests, etc:**

NOLS Admission Office  
284 Lincoln Street  
Lander, WY 82520  
800.710.6657  
Fax: 307.332.1220  
[admissions@nols.edu](mailto:admissions@nols.edu)

**For specific questions regarding the PIC qualifications or application process contact the NOLS Training Manager at:**

1.800.622.6686  
[training@nols.edu](mailto:training@nols.edu)

The PIC Application packet can also be downloaded from our web site at this address:  
[http://www.nols.edu/courses/pdf/admissionforms/pic\\_app.pdf](http://www.nols.edu/courses/pdf/admissionforms/pic_app.pdf)



**To Receive An Professional Instructor Course Application Packet Please Return The Following Form To NOLS**

I have read the information on Professional Instructor Courses and believe I'm a qualified applicant.

Please send me a PIC application packet

I don't have a current copy of the NOLS catalog. Please send me one.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Home phone: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Work phone: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

NOLS Graduate?  Yes  No If yes, course and date: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about NOLS? \_\_\_\_\_

**NOLS**

Admissions Office

**284 Lincoln Street**

**Lander, WY 82520**

Phone: 800.710.6657

[admissions@nols.edu](mailto:admissions@nols.edu)

