Luke Haumesser was two hours up a steep trail on a cold, rainy, Adirondack April day. The higher he climbed, the deeper the snow was underfoot.

“I was sitting on a log, wet, miserable and eating a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich,” he said. “And I still felt really good about what I was doing.”

Haumesser and his companions were participants in the first SUNY Adirondack Leadership Challenge, held at ESF’s Newcomb Campus in April. The day they climbed the mountain, they were practicing lessons they had learned the previous day about how to cultivate successful leadership behaviors and operate from the most favorable emotional state.

“There was a moment on that hike when some of the group became concerned that we’d lost the trail,” Haumesser said. “But instead of panicking, we decided to take a step back, eat our lunch and make a decision and work as a group. We had to ask ourselves if we trusted each other. And we did. We found out we were going the right way. In fact, we were only 45 minutes from the top.”

Haumesser, an area coordinator in residence life at SUNY Geneseo, was one of 13 people who participated in the Leadership Challenge. Twelve participants came from eight SUNY institutions; one came from St. John Fisher College in Rochester.

The program is a partnership between ESF’s Newcomb-based Northern Forest Institute (NFI) and the SUNY Leadership Institute (SUNYLI), which serves the entire university system.

The challenge was led by Paul Hai, program director with NFI; Lee Riddell, director of SUNYLI; Michael Pastore, an associate with SUNYLI who serves as registrar at Cayuga Community College; and Norm Pure, a SUNYLI associate who has been involved in the field of human potential development for more than 20 years.

“We have begun delivering leadership programs in keeping with our name,” said Hai. “And this is the first time we’ve gone public in that way to meet the needs of SUNY.”

While usually referred to simply as NFI for brevity’s sake, the institute’s full name is Northern Forest Institute for Conservation Education and Leadership Training.

Riddell said the leadership program gave participants a chance to understand how they react under stress and to use their strengths to face a challenge. She said the natural setting at Newcomb was uniquely suited to that purpose. Getting outdoors in a natural environment with limited access to electronic communication gives people a chance to focus on themselves, she said.

Her goal, she said, is to cultivate a culture within the SUNY system that encourages faculty and staff members to use their strengths to face challenges. The mission of SUNYLI is to provide expertise on leadership development that prepares college leaders for broader roles and greater responsibility. The institute serves executives, administrators, faculty and trustees from SUNY’s 64 campuses, as well as public and private colleges across the United States and Canada.

The three-day program weaves group problem-solving tasks, interactive discussions and outdoor active learning to enhance leadership skills. Interactive sessions focus on helping participants recognize how their feelings at any given moment can influence their performance as a leader and how a leader’s performance, health and relationships can be influenced by emotional triggers over the course of a day. To obtain more information about SUNYLI or to see a PowerPoint presentation about the first SUNY Adirondack Leadership Challenge, visit http://sunyli.suny.edu/.

The second SUNY Adirondack Leadership Challenge will be held April 23 to 26, 2015, at ESF’s Newcomb Campus. If you would like to attend or simply learn more about it, email Paul Hai, program coordinator for ESF’s Northern Forest Institute, at pbhai@esf.edu.