

The Long-Term Effects of a First-Year Student Wilderness Orientation Program

Michael A. Gass, Daniel E. Garvey, Deborah A. Sugerman

Positive changes were found 17 years after participants' experiences in a wilderness orientation program. Three themes representing the changes emerged from the data: (a) challenging assumptions of self and others, (b) strong effects of peer relationships, and (c) long-term positive effects of the orientation program during students' undergraduate education, as well as after graduation.

Keywords: Orientation, Adventure, Long-term Change

Orientation programs have long been a key element for creating positive transitions for students into college and university settings; the first such program being implemented at Boston University in 1888 (Bonner, 1972). The central objective of these programs generally focuses on student adjustment to college. And while the goals of college and university wilderness orientation programs can vary (e.g., Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Galloway, 2000), successful programs are typically expected to translate into lower student attrition rates, increased academic performance, greater levels of emotional and social development, and more positive attitudes toward the institution (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998; Galloway; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft & Gardiner, 1993). The failure of any type of orientation program to reach these outcomes has financial and personal consequences, for both the institution as well as students, particularly in the area of attrition/retention.

Michael A. Gass, Ph.D., is a Professor and Coordinator, of the Outdoor Education Program in the Department of Kinesiology, University of New Hampshire. E-mail: mgass@christa.unh.edu

Daniel E. Garvey, Ph.D., is President of Prescott College, Prescott, AZ.

Deborah A. Sugerman, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology, at the University of New Hampshire. E-mail: deborahs@hopper.unh.edu

Most of the research conducted on the effectiveness of orientation programs has centered on changes during students' first year of school, although there have been several efforts to examine the influence of first year orientation efforts in students' later years in higher education (Gass, 1990). While such efforts have been viewed as longitudinal in design, very little research has been conducted to examine the influence of orientation programs on students' lives following graduation. Recent investigations of student development after college have provided further insight into the influence, potency, and richness of how college affects students later in life. Areas of recent interest have included the relationship of college experiences and psychosocial development (Martin, 2000), the construction of adult identities (Baxter-Magolda, 1999a), the search for meaning in young adulthood (Baxter-Magolda, 1999b), and how institutions might help students develop as better adults (Baxter-Magolda, 2002). Yet specific foci linking influences of orientation programming to long-term change remain unrevealed.

Our purpose for this study was to investigate the influences of a first year university wilderness orientation program on participants over an extended period of time (i.e., 17 years). In this process, we hoped to examine key elements of the program from a retrospective vantage point not previously taken by past studies. We thought such perspectives might provide important information on the development of orientation programs from a previously un-accessed source of information (in this case,

participants' perspectives 17 years following their involvement in a university orientation program). We believed such information might increase the knowledge of how wilderness orientation programs aid in the adjustment of students to college, as well as highlight how such programs may play a role in the overall education of students, their professional lives, and other areas of personal and social growth from a broader lifespan perspective. We further believed such a study may provide insight into factors associated with lasting changes from adventure programs versus factors that may only produce short-term changes in participants' lives.

Method

One-Year Study

In 1984, the University of New Hampshire conducted the "Summer Fireside Experience Program" (SFEP) for incoming students. The program consisted of a five-day orientation program using a variety of outdoor adventure experiences as a vehicle to reach the following six objectives: (a) foster positive peer-group development, (b) develop positive interaction with faculty members, (c) focus attention on career and/or major course of study plans, (d) heighten interest in academics, (e) develop a sense of urgency in being prepared for a positive start to school, and (f) insure that students understood how to match their interests and expectations to university offerings. Three structured, voluntary, follow-up adventure experiences focusing on reinforcing the program's objectives were offered to participants during their first year of school (further information on the curriculum associated with this program can be found in Gass, 1999).

In the initial evaluation of the effectiveness of the SFEP orientation experience, changes in this group were compared to participants in another orientation program occurring five days prior to the first day of university classes (i.e., "Freshman Camp"), as well as students who did not participate in either program. The three groups were compared on attrition/retention rates, grade point averages, and task and sub-task areas from a shortened version of the Student Development Task Inventory (SDTI-2) (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1982). Positive significant differences ($*p < .05$) between the SFEP and two other comparison groups were found in student retention, grade point averages, and in the psychosocial areas of autonomy, interpersonal relationships, interdependence, appropriate relationships with the opposite sex, and tolerance (Gass, 1987).

Three and a Half Year Study

Retention rates for these three groups were further analyzed in a quantitative, longitudinal design 42

months (three and a half years) following the initial five-day orientation program. While the differences between groups was reduced to a marginal significant difference ($p = .061$), the SFEP group still demonstrated a 12% higher retention rate than the other supplemental orientation group, and a 20% higher retention rate than the control group (Gass, 1990).

Seventeen-Year Study

Fifty percent ($n = 16$) of the participants from the initial 1984 SFEP were contacted and interviewed 17 years after the original experience to examine the impact the program had on their lives. Allowing participants to recall an experience and share their current understanding of its possible significance has proven to be a valuable research technique in identifying the long-term meanings participants place on prior experiences (House, 1991). Our research approach expands on the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Martin (2000), who found that college experiences had potentially long-lasting impact on participants, even four years after college. We also sought to examine if this college experience possessed long-term positive effects on participants, what elements and dynamics might have led to such impacts?

Data Collection

Despite the problems associated with finding people after 17 years, contact information for all 32 participants was obtained. We conducted interviews with 16 randomly selected members of the 1984 study (eight female and eight male participants); 50% of the original group who participated in 1984. The interviews with each participant lasted between 45-60 minutes in length and were conducted via telephone and tape-recorded with the participant's permission. In the latter interviews of the data collection process, many of the themes and experiences shared by the participants became redundant, approaching a point of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because of this, we decided not to conduct any further interviews.

The primary author (Gass) conducted all 16 interviews. We chose to use one interviewer in this study because it offered two critical advantages over using multiple interviewers. First, we believed it allowed us to develop a more complete "grounded theory" (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of client experiences. Second, the author (Gass) had conducted a field observation of the original orientation program 17 years ago. He possessed intimate knowledge of the program experiences offered to participants. We found this knowledge to provide an invaluable resource for understanding the statements of participants in a manner that added greater clarity to the subtle references made by partici-

pants during the interviews.

Prior to the interviews, the author prepared a list of open, yet guiding questions to assist participants when they were discussing their memories of the 1984 Summer Fireside orientation program. Based on responses to these questions, he used further probing questions to help clarify, deepen, and confirm participants' responses, as well as follow-up questions to enrich our understanding of answers to the main questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This interview format proved effective, allowing participants to move the discussion in the direction of their choice, while permitting confirmation of the accuracy of our understanding of participants' statements. Using this approach also allowed him to change the interview format and direction to meet the needs of the participant, thus improving the ultimate validity of the data gathering process. "In fact, unlike experimental studies, changes in observation protocols or interview schedules in a field study usually reflect a better understanding of the setting, thereby heightening the internal validity of the study" (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 431).

Data Reduction

The interviews produced approximately 16 hours of audiotapes. The second author (Garvey) listened to all of the tapes in order to insure the questions and comments were understandable. After this screening process the tapes were transcribed. The transcriptions were then reviewed separately, with each reviewer (Garvey and Sugerman) using open coding and axial coding processes to identify emerging concepts with their associated properties, dimensions, and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used the process of having two researchers reduce the data independently because we felt it decreased the possibility of interviewer bias as a factor when developing conceptual themes (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988).

Once the reviewers completed their separate open and axial coding processes, they compared their findings. To guide their dialogue they used a selective coding process (i.e., a process of integrating or refining central categories or themes) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process included: (a) agreeing in a consensus manner on central themes; (b) seeking to integrate these themes to a point of conceptualization and an overarching theoretical scheme (i.e., developing rich concepts not only appropriately representing the data but also offering one interpretation making sense for all clients' experiences); and (c) refining emerging theories (i.e., "reviewing the scheme for internal consistency and for gaps in logic, filling in poorly developed categories and for gaps in logic, and validating the scheme") (Strauss & Corbin, p. 156).

Results

Data Organization

Three central categories or themes emerging from the coding processes were:

1. *Challenging assumptions of self and others*—where participants commented on how the program had altered their previously held beliefs about themselves and others.
2. *Peer friendships as a support network*—where participants spoke of how they got to know other participants and how these initial contacts were sustained during, and in many cases after, their college experience, and;
3. *Long-term positive effects of the orientation program during their undergraduate education as well as after graduation*—where participants talked about the positive impact of the program during their undergraduate education, as well as continuing impact of the program on their personal and professional lives after graduation.

Data Interpretation

Each interview represented the story of someone's recollection of a set of activities occurring 17 years previously. Although the participants in the initial orientation program shared many similarities (e.g., they were all approximately the same age and were all experiencing college for the first time), 17 years later these same participants represented a very diverse set of people. Choices of professions, life experiences, and good and bad luck contributed to the researchers' assessment that these initial participants had evolved into very different people.

At the beginning of this study we questioned whether any respondents would have consistent recollections of events that took place 17 years previously. Given the manner in which the participants' lives had changed since their initial experience, the researchers did not anticipate any consistency in memories. Despite these beliefs, three themes emerged that were remarkably similar and consistent among every one of the 16 participants who responded.

Challenging assumptions of self and others. One of the most dominant themes reported by all program participants was how the orientation program began a strong personal understanding of their assumptions and biases regarding how people should act and what others should believe. Based on the convincing initial influence of the SFEP orientation program, participants began to experience the wide diversity of opinions and lifestyles that most of the participants believed were one of the main benefits of their university education. Participants remembered vivid examples of how their beliefs and assumptions about the world were chal-

lenged as soon as they arrived at the orientation program. One participant remarked:

It kind of opened my eyes. I said, hey, wait a minute; these are really different people, with different perspectives and have different backgrounds from me. And everyone has different goals and look at all these possibilities. Most kids going to school don't think about those things, the big picture.

Another respondent commented, "The first word that comes to mind is naive. But freshmen are naive in general. You think you've figured something out already then you come to college and quickly figure out you don't know a whole lot." Another participant said,

Yeah, I came from a middle class white neighborhood. I certainly don't think that I was blatantly racist or homophobic or anything like that, but I never had any exposure to people different than me except going to NYC and doing things like that. You know I came from this white conservative New England family. I'm unlike anyone in my family. I'm the only one who votes Democratic, I'm the only one who climbs, rides a bike, hikes, and does these things on a regular basis... I'm the only one in my family that's followed a very nontraditional path in my life. I think college in general did that to me, but I think the SFEP orientation program was one of the big motivators.

In addition to participants commenting about how their assumptions of others were challenged and altered as a result of the SFEP orientation program, participants also spoke consistently about how their pre-conceived notions of themselves were challenged during the program.

The program was probably one of the first things I experienced on my own. Other than this program I was always with my parents. I was the youngest of six [children], really a homebody and I had never really been away from home so the program was the first opportunity I had to be on my own. The orientation program was a chance for me to be on my own away from my parents and I think what it did was help to open my eyes and see that I could do things on my own, and from that point I never really went home again. It allowed me to see I could be independent.

Another participant summarized the change with the following comment,

It kind of gave me the feeling that I could conquer anything. I had never really been away from my parents, I had never been independent, I had never had to get up and get along with other people in a new environment. The program gave me confidence; it made me feel like I had done something. So I figured if I could do this program I could pass college Spanish.

Even 17 years after their experience, participants were consistent in their recollections that the SFEP orienta-

tion program changed their assumptions about themselves and others and the program dramatically affected their previously held beliefs.

Peer friendships as a support network. Consistent in all interviews were the stories of participants meeting new people through SFEP and how these friendships helped with the initial transition to college. For many participants, these peer connections became the foundation for life-long friendships. One participant recollected,

We were so close; it was just us there and we had to rely on each other; that's what it was about. We were just so close for that short period of time and when school started there were so many people around. I remember people from my orientation trip better than I remember some of my teammates from intercollegiate basketball. That's kind of strange, I am not sure why that is.

Reflecting on the importance of the SFEP orientation program a participant commented:

The program gave me a support group for the first year; I mean, I saw people from my trip everywhere. And these were the people I formed lasting relationships with. You know, I feel that kind of support network is crucial for anyone to be successful in college. I just found I derived a lot of support from these people.

Positive effects of the orientation program during their undergraduate education as well as after graduation. The largest number of comments and greatest amount of dialogue during the interviews focused on the long-term impact of the program. Participants spoke frequently about how the program changed the direction they took in their lives. For example, one participant stated:

I probably would have stayed in a dorm, rushed a sorority, [I've] been your typical college sorority person with a degree in journalism. I probably wouldn't even been anywhere near where I am today. SFEP sent me off in a different direction. Although I'd like to think I would have ended up where I am today without the program, I just don't see that I would have.

A similar comment from another participant points to how the type of impact of the program influenced his life:

During our solo (reflective period) on Mt. Chocurua, I saw what my life was going to be like at UNH [University of New Hampshire]. A lot of my classmates from my home town were going to UNH, and I saw myself hanging out with them and drinking, ending up going home on the weekends and not really doing anything different. At this instant, I knew this wasn't what I wanted and knew I wanted things to be different.

As I look back on the program, I saw this as a pivotal point in my life. It wasn't as if this one experience changed my life, but it led me to veer away from what I saw as my

future to a path toward something else. As college progressed for me, this “veering off” the track of what my life was going to be, to what I really wanted became greater and greater each year. The SFEP wasn’t totally responsible for getting me to where I am today, but it was the first step in the trajectory away from where I was going to where I wanted to be.

The SFEP orientation program was also seen as directly impacting on goal setting and specific life choices. For example, one participant stated:

It’s not uncommon in my life that I’ve had to make decisions to do things that I didn’t think I could do. There are direct connections from the SFEP program creating this ability in me, like going to medical school. This was something I hadn’t even thought I was capable of doing, especially when I started out thinking I didn’t even know if I was going to make it through the university. And then here I was aspiring to do that (going to medical school) and not knowing if I was going to make it.

Another participant summarized the impact of the SFEP orientation program with the following comment, “I think the most important thing the program did was it helped me to become a leader. That’s become a really important part of my life.” Another participant said, “I reflect back on the SFEP and I’ve incorporated it throughout my life in the past seventeen years.”

Discussion

Our process of validating themes from individual yet different experiences is similar to the process of other qualitative researchers (Denzin, 1994; Patton, 2001). Specific “learnings” often occur for each individual, but through a process of reflection and “standing back” from powerful individual experiences, researchers can uncover “patterns of change that cut across the specifics of person and circumstance” (Campbell & Patton, 2001, p. 449).

While different, the comments and recollections of the participants’ experiences were consistently positive as they spoke about taking part in the SFEP orientation program 17 years earlier. These narrative recollections were rich representations of how participants interpreted their SFEP experience. Participants possessed vivid and accurate recollections of their experiences and the long-term, lasting influences on their lives. Reflective comments often included the temperature of the day, the color of the sky, the feelings they had, and other individually relevant elements of their experiences. Participants stated the SFEP orientation program invoked specific memories that had been recounted many times prior to the study’s interviews about the

impact of the program.

And while the orientation experience affected people over time in different ways, three consistent themes emerged in all 16 interviews. These emerging themes were: (a) how participants were led to challenge their assumptions of themselves and others; (b) how the development of close peer friendships helped with their initial transition to college, as well as how these connections often became the foundation for life-long friendships; and (c) how the orientation program positively effected their undergraduate education as well as their lives after graduation.

The emergence of these three themes from the interviews adds interesting insights into the recent findings of other researchers. The first theme of “challenging assumptions of self and others” has been recognized as a key element in the formation of young adults in higher education settings (Baxter-Magolda, 1999a, 2000; Willimon & Naylor, 1995) as well as an outcome often associated with effective wilderness education programs (Campbell & Patton, 2001). Narratives in this study supporting this theme seem quite similar to the concept of “self-authorship” advanced by Kegan (1982, 1994) and further applied by Baxter-Magolda (1998, 2001, 2002). As defined by these writers/researchers, self-authorship is “the capacity to author, or invent, one’s own beliefs, values, sense of self, and relationship with others” (Baxter-Magolda, 2002, p. 3).

What differs in this study is when self-authorship occurs. Past researchers (Baxter-Magolda, 2002) have found self-authorship remains elusive for most young adults during college due to “the lack of emphasis on developing an internal self” and the inability to move “away from traditional forms of teaching and control-oriented forms of organizing student life that prevail on many campuses” (p. 5). Interestingly, this did not seem to be the case for SFEP participants. This difference may be the result of the strong focus of the SFEP on the internal development of self combined with the non-traditional form of organizing student life, serving as a catalyst toward an earlier process of self-authorship in students’ lives. Note that earlier studies (Gass, 1987; 1990) had already established evidence of the program generating positive significant differences in the psychosocial areas of autonomy, interpersonal relationships, interdependence, appropriate relationships with the opposite sex, and tolerance.

The second theme of “peer friendships as a support network,” certainly confirms past research. Peer influence has long been identified as one of the strongest influences of student behavior (Astin, 1997; Magolda, 2001), aiding in the adjustment to university life (Pratt et al., 2000), and a major focus for incoming students (Paul & Kelleher, 1995). As seen in the narrative from

this study, probably one of the most important conclusions is to remind student affairs professionals of the value of peer networks in helping incoming students with their initial transition to college, the reliance and support such networks provide, and the foundation many of these networks may eventually provide for life-long friendships.

The third theme of the “positive effects of the orientation program during participants’ undergraduate education,” as well as after graduation, may present the most telling results. While we know not all experiences have equal impact on students’ lives, intervening elements (e.g., life cycle issues, changes in familial structures) often influence the potential effect certain experiences can have on their lives. “Universal factors” reaching across different student life structures are important to consider for college student personnel involved with orientation programming. The two universal factors seeming to have positively interacted and deepened the richness of the orientation experience for participants in this study were: (a) the influences of timing of an experience in their lives and, (b) the influences of program intensity.

The influences of timing. Because students entering college are typically in a state of high receptivity, orientation programs can possess great potential for short and long-term change. The positive, powerful experiences referred to by participants in this study should remind institutions of the critical role (and responsibility) they have in the lives of incoming students, both in the immediate college environment as well as the long-term influence on these individuals. It also should encourage colleges and universities to create and maintain well designed intensive orientation programs, understanding the successful implementation of orientation programs can foster long-lasting benefits for their alumni. College personnel also need to be aware of the cultural norms, values, and beliefs espoused in orientation programming regarding the ritual messages inherent in college programming (Magolda, 2001). Some of these messages and their associated value structures may be positive and educationally rich, whereas others may prove to be misleading and non-educative.

The influences of program intensity. Regarding intensity, participants clearly expressed their beliefs that this program possessed both short and long-term beneficial effects in their university, as well as post-baccalaureate lives. The initial studies in 1987 and 1990 demonstrated positive effects of the SFEP orientation programs at both one, and three and a half years, following the experience. The 17 year study provided validation of the long-term impact of these experiences, as well as particular outcomes thought to provide benefits for college life, as well as life after graduation.

Participants in the study were consistent in their praise regarding how the program assisted them in taking advantage of their new university experience, as well as how it oriented them in a positive direction for the rest of their lives. Long-term influences described by participants included direction in their careers, direction in the personal lives, development of personal values and skills, and development of life-long friendships. These findings are consistent with other results of what the orientation literature states as intended programming outcomes (Astin, 1997). Given this, orientation programmers should be reminded of the importance of small group programming and interactions.

Finally, all of the participants in this study made positive comments about the manner in which the SFEP orientation program was designed and delivered. Participants felt the use of challenging activities in an outdoor environment combined with the use of reflection activities to assist participants when internalizing the impact of these experiences was critical to their growth. Just as all learning experiences are not equally powerful, it is probably true that all wilderness orientation programs are not equally beneficial in their short and long-term impact for participants. Much of the success of the Summer Fireside Experience Program was probably related to the importance in achieving the goals of the program, and the effectiveness of the program staff to facilitate positive change through the program’s adventure experiences.

It is our belief as researchers that the changes expressed by the SFEP participants were not the result of merely recreating in a group in the outdoors prior to school, but the interaction of challenging yet supportive outdoor learning experiences with the six student orientation objectives (i.e., foster positive peer-group development; develop positive interaction with faculty members; focus attention on career and/or major course of study plans; heighten interest in academics; develop a sense of urgency in being prepared for a positive start to school; and insure that students understood how to match their interests and expectations to university offerings). Very little of the participants’ narrative in the 17 year study revolved around discussing actual outdoor experiences, and there is significant evidence of differences in growth when comparing the SFEP group to the Freshman Camp group after one year. Most importantly, what we believe the 17 year study *does* represent is that carefully designed wilderness orientation programs focused on maximizing participants’ connections to one another, as well as the university environment, can have powerful, positive impact upon entering students regarding their lives in higher education, as well as following graduation.

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