

SEER 2007 Abstract

Student Involvement: Critical Concerns of Outdoor Orientation Programs

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Outdoor orientation programs have been operating in colleges and universities in the United States since 1935, when Dartmouth College ran its first precollege trips for first-year students (Hooke, 1987). Although this program provided an effective transitional experience to Dartmouth, 33 years passed before another college or university, Prescott College, implemented a wilderness orientation program in 1968. The Prescott program was more heavily influenced by Outward Bound (OB) than the Dartmouth trips (Prescott College, 2007). The ensuing 10 years (1968–1978) saw significant growth in outdoor orientation programs, mainly at private colleges and universities across the U.S. These programs developed largely independent of each other, under the leadership of a few key personalities within an institution, rather than out of a national conversation on orientation practices and principles.

Review of Literature

Over the years researchers have attempted to gather information on outdoor orientation programs. Past researchers used different sampling techniques to locate programs (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Galloway, 2000; Gass, 1984; O’Keefe 1989), but all concluded more outdoor orientation programs probably existed than they were able to find.

In the fall of 2005, a research group for the present study set out to create a definitive list of all college and university outdoor orientation programs in the United States. The list was limited to programs that met

the following criteria: they used adventure activities, and they spent at least one night away from campus, camping in small groups. This definition seemed to best capture the earlier Outward Bound-adapted model that developed at Prescott and other schools with long-running outdoor orientation programs in the United States.

Identified programs were surveyed to ascertain key program characteristics. The data allowed researchers to investigate multiple questions. First, the researchers were interested in how programs run by a professional director compared to student-run programs. Secondly, the researchers investigated the training of student leaders. Lastly, researchers sought to identify areas in need of improvement within the outdoor orientation field as whole.

Methodology

The researchers contacted all four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. For the purposes of this study, colleges and universities were defined as schools that offer a baccalaureate degree, are accredited, and which have a primarily residential, rather than online or virtual campus. Members of the research team were assigned states and were given the task of locating and contacting all outdoor orientation programs within their states. If a college or university did have an outdoor orientation program, the researchers asked the respective program representative to complete an online survey.

The survey posed questions specific to the researchers' inquiries, such as: Who administers your program? What is the minimum number of hours of training you require of your leaders? What are the minimum first-aid requirements of your leaders? Do you have an active risk management committee? Have you ever participated in a formal program review?

After the data were collected, they were placed in an SPSS program for analysis. The researchers used Chi Square testing to look for significant differences between variables.

Results

The researchers identified 202 programs. Through reminder e-mails and follow-up telephone calls, the research team was able to generate a 97% response rate to the online survey. Data screening resulted in the removal of 38 programs that upon analysis did not match the researchers' established criteria of an outdoor orientation program. Most of the 38 programs not fitting the criteria did use outdoor adventure activities, but did not spend a night away from campus in small groups. Other program results were not included when specific questions important for the analysis were left blank by the respondents.

Student or Professional Leadership

While most programs ($n = 144$) were under the direction of a full or part-time professional director, a number of programs ($n = 15$) reported being completely student-run. Professional-run and student-run programs differed significantly in only one notable area at the $p < 0.1$ level of significance: Student-run programs were more likely to possess National Forest Service permits, Pearson $\chi^2(2, n = 157) = 4.62, p = 0.09$, Cramér's $V = 0.172$. In general, student-run programs did *not* differ significantly from professionally run programs in program operations, including risk management practices, hours of leader training, and medical certifications required of leaders.

Leaders

While the main goal of outdoor orientation programs may be to ease the transition of first-year students into college, outdoor orientation programs also train many peer leaders in backcountry and interpersonal skills. The number of outdoor orientation leaders varied from program to program. Although the average leadership staff was 22, two large programs with more than 180 leaders skewed the results. When looking at programs with fewer than 100 leaders, the average number was much lower ($n = 10$). On average, these leaders received 48 hours of training. Approximately a third of the programs required Wilderness First Aid training ($n = 52$) for leaders. Thirty-five programs required basic first aid training, while another 42 required Wilderness First Responder.

Areas to Improve

Many of the 164 programs did not have a number of risk management practices common to outdoor programs accredited by the Association of Experiential Education. Only 44 programs reported an active risk management committee. Even fewer programs have conducted a formal external review ($n = 29$). Although 53 programs conducted informal risk management reviews, a total of 94 programs (58%) have not conducted any review.

Discussion

Data from this survey revealed that there are few notable differences between programs run by a professional director and programs run by students. It was expected that programs with professional leadership would be more likely follow the accreditation standards of the Association of Experiential Education, and be more supported by and integrated into the college. This was not found to be the case; the only significant difference between professionally run and student-run programs was that student-run programs were more likely to possess National Forest Service permits.

Possessing permits may be an indication that student-run programs were more attentive to public land use policies, or that student-run programs were more likely to use public lands (and thus need permits). What can be surmised is that student-run programs are not, in aggregate, different from professionally run outdoor orientation programs.

Although some students may be involved in the operations and management of outdoor orientation programs, they are more commonly involved as peer leaders. The researchers in this study found that more than 4,000 undergraduates in 2006 were actively involved in leading outdoor orientation programs. While the amount and type of training varied among programs, these leaders were typically trained in backcountry skills, group facilitation, and first aid. Although the focus of outdoor orientation programs is upon the first-year students transitioning to college, the benefits to the student leaders remain largely unknown. There is potential for research regarding the effects of outdoor orientation leadership training on the student leaders.

The researchers found key aspects of risk management systems and review processes lacking among outdoor orientation programs, an area in need of increased consistency and standardization. Although having an active risk management committee or external program review does not directly translate into program quality, these measures do denote a level of sophistication and seriousness about an orientation program's risk management system. Given that outdoor orientation programs place students into challenging situations, it is important that program staff review risk management systems to provide support congruent with the level of challenge. External reviews and risk management committees are two methods for ensuring sufficient attention is being paid to risk management and, in a larger sense, program quality. Increased use of these practices is likely to improve the impact of outdoor orientation programs.

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