

Joining Team Building and Experiential Learning in an Orientation Leader Training Program: The Quest Training Model

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A strong orientation leader training program blends elements of adventure programming with experiential, process-oriented content instruction. The core of The Quest Training Model rests on a strong and intentional team building component that initiates and grounds the entire training. Student leaders who participate in this program experience many components of forming a learning community and working team. The student leaders build their team through (a) an initial ropes course experience; (b) adventure learning strategies that teach content and skills of student leadership; and (c) the consistent and conscientious incorporation of team skills while they function as orientation leaders. Team building is not an isolated event from which students are expected to make their own transfer of learning, but a series of methods and strategies that are integrated into every aspect of the training.

College freshman orientation programs depend on the knowledge, skill, and talent of a strong student staff to facilitate the process of acclimating new students and their parents to the campus community. With this in mind, the Quest Training Model was developed to build a strong orientation team through effective facilitation, mentorship, advising, and ambassadorship. This experiential training model integrates a core of team building and process-oriented instructional strategies which develops the students' interpersonal skills. The training program focuses on team building, content learning, and application—all designed to create a holistic, experiential student leadership development experience.

The Quest Training Model was developed by the authors at Radford University, a comprehensive, public, liberal arts institution with 8,550 students. The university prides itself on its student-centered, community-based approach to teaching and learning. The summer orientation program, known as Quest, orients approximately 1,500 new students and 2,000 parents during the five day-and-a-half long programs offered each summer.

Overview of the Quest Training Model

Three focus areas shape the Quest Training Model: (a) establishment of common

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bonds of community and teamwork with a focus on ropes course experiences, (b) adventure learning strategies that teach content and student leadership, and (c) application of team skills during the orientation experience. The process is not linear but rather develops in layers from a core of team building and community. The essential content, which includes topics such as campus resource information, student development theory, and new student transition data utilizes the process of building and nurturing a team to an outcome of effective application of knowledge and skill (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

An illustration of the training model — a team building core, with content as the connection between the team building element and the outcomes of the program.



The Training Core: Building the Team Via Ropes Training

Student orientation leaders typically enter the training process with high energy and even higher expectations. This eagerness creates positive anticipation which is critical for learning (Caine & Caine, 1991), and the students are ready to invest themselves, physically and psychologically (Astin, 1993). The Quest Training Model capitalizes on this energy by incorporating experiential learning techniques including challenge ropes course components.

The ropes course is highly engaging and physical in nature. As students look at the various climbing activities, their responses range from cautious curiosity to anxious anticipation. The focus on individual expectations mirrors their sense of identity of the early stage of training, with each student eager to perform her or his individual role well. For the Quest Training Model to be a success, however, student leaders must be both individually competent and collectively effective. The goal of the ropes course training, then, is to enlist individual energy to mold a team by addressing three important aspects of team development: (a) community/team identity; (b) team problem-solving skills; and (c) a supportive environment for meeting individual challenges.

Building Team Identity

The first full day of the ropes course experience is devoted to cooperative games, group problem-solving initiatives and the low ropes course. The activities of the day provide a chance for students to do the initial work of community building—getting acquainted, beginning to build relationships with each other, and identifying common interests and strengths. As the day progresses, students develop comfort with each other, and begin to erase the previous clique and personal friendship allegiances.

Without group identity and goals, individuals fade from participation in the group's tasks. The cooperative games of the early part of the ropes course training engender group identity by leveling the playing field. The activities require brainstorming, not brawn; action, not achievement. It is not the gifted athlete who succeeds, but the group which combines its efforts. The integration of two operating norms, "Full Value Contract" and "Challenge by Choice," developed and articulated by Project Adventure, Inc. (Henton, 1996), enhances the community building.

"Full Value Contract" requires group members to commit to behaviors that actively support the individual, the group as a whole, and the learning experience. Student leaders agree to "play hard, play fair, and play safe." They identify specific behaviors for each aspect of the contract (see Figure 2). "Challenge by Choice," the norm which encourages individuals to choose their levels of challenge, provides a framework for students to set individual and group goals (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 2

An example of a Full Value Contract

Play Hard	Play Safe	Play Fair
Give your best effort	Follow safety guidelines	Be honest
Stay focused	Don't put down or "diss"	Follow rules to games
Be on time	Criticize ideas, not people	Ask questions; don't judge
Encourage each other	Listen to other ideas	Help each other stay focused
Give feedback	Maintain physical safety	Give and receive feedback

FIGURE 3

Sample of individual and group goals

Group goals and challenges

- Take time to plan before acting
- Establish a leader
- One person talks at a time
- Have fun

Individual goals and challenges

- Step back and let others speak first
- Take time to listen to other's ideas
- Be energetic
- Complement and encourage other people

Promoting Team Problem-Solving

A second goal of the ropes course training is to develop team problem solving skills. The Quest Training Model requires student leaders to be ready to step in and negotiate the inevitable glitches and bumps of the program. Once orientation begins, the leaders deal with problems from misarranged rooms to sessions that go overtime and result in schedule conflicts. They handle some conflicts individually and others collectively. In either case, it is imperative that they think quickly, adjust gracefully, and take action to resolve problems and move forward.

The problem solving initiatives of the ropes course experience, like the cooperative games, are unconventional. The "Full Value Contract" and "Challenge by Choice" remind the group to address the processes of problem solving. The facilitators challenge the group to consider how it treats its members and balances individual goals with the group task. Each initiative begins with a briefing session at which the facilitator presents the challenge. The group then proceeds with the activity, and concludes with a time of discussion. The focus of this processing session is the identification of behaviors that assist the group and help individuals reach their goals. The processing is also an opportunity to look at how actions during the initiative can mirror behaviors in other stressful situations. With the facilitators' guidance, students transfer insights gained at the ropes course to expected behaviors as Student orientation leaders.

Providing Support for Individuals

The third aspect of team development is individual challenge. For this, the training turns to the high ropes course. Constructed initiatives between 20 and 40 feet off the ground require individuals to face a number of challenges, including anxiety about height, trust in the relay system, the ability to ask for help, and the importance of giving encouragement. They face numerous challenges during the training program which push them to strengthen existing skills and develop new ones. The high ropes course facilitates this growth as the group builds on the norms of "Full Value Contract" and "Challenge by Choice" and processes the experience and learning from each activity. This portion, crucial to the success of the training, results in positive group-to-individual transfer or process gain, whereby the solutions and ideas generated through the group interaction are greater than those generated individually (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The ropes course is more than a tool for team building in this model; it is a vehicle for leadership training.

Teaching Content in Context

Team building and curriculum are too often isolated as separate entities of a training program. The Adventure in the Classroom Model (Henton, 1996) from which the Quest Training Model had its roots, embeds continuous and conscientious efforts to strengthen the team with the very content that requires them to form in the first place. Student leaders are expected to leave their training knowledgeable and articulate about numerous

aspects of campus. They must be familiar with academic policies, registration procedures, the campus judicial system, student health services, the various residence halls and opportunities for student leadership.

Time to thoroughly digest the curriculum is limited. While it might appear expedient to teach content via lecture, notes, and formal presentations, such an approach would hinder the learning by its exclusion of interpersonal skill development and team growth. The power of the training rests in the marriage of content and community. Just as the spokes in a wheel secure the tire to its hub, providing support and strength to an otherwise sinewy sleeve of rubber, the content ties the training outcomes to its core—the team.

The goal of the content portion of the training is twofold—to teach content and to strengthen the team, which has now evolved into a learning community. The model first incorporates team learning and teaching strategies, then treats the learning of content as problem solving initiatives.

Team Learning and Teaching Strategies

Base teams, task teams (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1988) and K-E-L-A, a cognitive organizing structure, are the three primary team learning and teaching strategies of the Quest Training Model. K-E-L-A, which stands for “Know, Expect to Learn, Learn, and Apply,” is a structure for promoting self-directed learning and the construction of knowledge. Before the introduction of a topic or faculty presentation, students take time to identify individually what they Know (K) about the topic and what they Expect to learn (E). Following the lesson or presentation, students return to their charts and reflect on the session to articulate what they have Learned (L) and how they will Apply (A) that knowledge.

The more individuals experience positive relationships within the learning community, the more willing and able they are to take the risks necessary for learning and growth (Henton, 1996). The base team and task team structures strengthen the atmosphere of support initiated during the ropes course experience. The five-person base teams whose purpose it is to support, encourage, and provide connection, bring consistency to the content-intensive portion of the training. The base team also facilitates connected learning, which is critical for skill development and transfer (Caine & Caine, 1991). On a daily basis students meet in their base teams to handle a variety of support and maintenance tasks. In these groups, leaders give and receive immediate feedback, vital to cognitive and interpersonal learning (Cross, 1976).

Content as Initiative

The skills students employ as they solve initiatives on the ropes course are the skills they apply during the content portion of their training. This transfer is not an automatic one for the students. The facilitators “bridge” the events from the ropes course experience to the content intensive portion of the training (Fogarty, 1992). Students deal with tiredness, frustration and miscommunication during the content training just as they had

during the ropes course. The language of problem solving and initiatives facilitates the transfer. Once the student orientation leaders see a long afternoon of presentations as an initiative to solve, they identify the concrete steps and supports necessary to meet that challenge. They apply the goal-setting and monitoring strategies earlier incorporated into their ropes course experience.

Outcomes: Team + Content

The Quest Training Model for student orientation leaders, with its focus on team building and content learning, is designed to effect two primary outcomes regarding leadership—facilitation skills and self-managed leadership. This third aspect of the training model is not an isolated outcome, but a deliberate extension of the team building and content learning into these outcomes. The student leaders are not independent agents during orientation. They operate as a team, solving problems together, providing support to each other, and creating time for self-managed briefing and feedback sessions. With each identified outcome, the student orientation leaders continue to integrate their experiences and learning as team members with their knowledge of the university.

Facilitation Skills

During orientation, leaders facilitate group discussions that focus on many campus life and academic issues. The incoming students who attend orientation face various anxieties, from scheduling and registration to worrying about the “fit” of the campus. Student orientation leaders must demonstrate confidence, exhibit enthusiasm, and provide a positive first experience as nervous new students search for personal connections. In doing so, Quest-trained peer leaders help students conquer the challenges of new relationships, new community, and group development. They draw on their earlier experiences at the ropes course as they navigate the sometimes choppy waters of group development and enlist each other’s support in meeting these challenges. They are able to make the transition from membership of a base team to leader of an advising group with ease because of their awareness of the language of group dynamics and the first hand experience of being a member of a small group.

Self-Managed Leadership

Another outcome of the Quest training is self-managed leadership. Student orientation leaders step into a new role during the orientation program. No longer self-focused team members, these students are now self-directed team leaders. They apply the skills of feedback, processing and goal-setting learned during the first phase of training to their current roles as facilitators, advisors, and ambassadors. They manage their own processing and goal setting sessions, no longer dependent on the direction of the training facilitators. They are now able to facilitate their own groups and help their peers with the sometimes unpredictable issue of group dynamics.

Conclusion

The purpose of the Quest Training Model is to initiate incoming freshman students to the community. However, a significant outcome of the program is the development of a community of student leaders committed to each other and to the university. The Quest Training Model is able to facilitate the growth of this community due to its unique approach to team building and experiential learning during the training. The strength of this training model lies in its ability to incorporate team building and experiential learning components from the beginning to the end, giving the community time to develop. The core of team building provides a structure and foundation for the effective learning of content and the application of new skills.

Although the Quest-trained team at Radford University disperses at the conclusion of the program, team members who return in the fall, are still invested in the university and demonstrate leadership in other capacities. Four students have pursued administrative appointments in the orientation program for the current year. Other students have assumed student government, residential life, and campus activities board leadership roles. This commitment to the larger community of Radford University is an outgrowth of an intensive, experiential training that maintains its core focus. The team is the place of identity, learning, risk taking, support, and service to the larger community.

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CAMPUS NOTES

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Building a Sense of Community Through a Summer Reading Program

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For a number of years discussions have taken place among faculty and administrators at Appalachian State University on implementing a summer reading program for freshmen in order to provide them a common intellectual experience, to enhance their sense of community on campus, and to set an academic tone for them prior to their arrival for their first year. In the fall and spring of 1996-97, the idea took root and was launched in the summer of 1997 with the enthusiastic support of the chancellor, provost, deans, department chairs, faculty, and staff.

A committee of faculty and staff, representing a variety of academic departments and programs on campus, selected Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) for the 1997 summer reading. This book was selected because of the powerful message it presents about personal development, freedom, and courage. Based on an actual historical event, it is the story of four sisters (the Mirabals) in the Dominican Republic who were involved in the underground resistance movement against the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo; three of the sisters were murdered in 1960. Alvarez's story shows how each of the three takes her separate path to martyrdom as a result of standing firm in personal belief in the face of a repressive dictatorship. The book not only encourages students to begin to think about important personal issues, but also introduces them to an Hispanic-American female writer who is an important emerging voice in our culture.

When students arrived for summer orientation, they received a copy of the reading selection as well as some study guide materials. They were asked to read the book and think about the study questions and guide materials before returning for fall semester. As part of their campus life orientation in the fall, the students participated in a discussion of the book led by volunteer faculty and staff, simulating the manner in which many university level discussion classes are conducted. The reading also enabled students to be prepared ahead of time for the discussion and assignments that were developed in classes such as the freshman seminar and their first year English classes.

The author of the book, Julia Alvarez, was the speaker for fall convocation and spent two days on campus talking informally with students, faculty, staff, and trustees. She presided at an open forum where she presented background information about the Dominican Republic, the Mirabal sisters, and the factors that influenced her to write the book. She talked about the process of writing and answered questions from the audience. She also read from her poetry and novels and autographed her books. An addi-

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