

Wilderness Pursuit Programs: An Orientation Paradigm

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Orientation programs need effective activities for integrating new students into the campus in which they have chosen to further their education. As students continue to change and institutions strive to meet the needs of students, alternative methods of presenting students with information to assist them in their transition is necessary. One area of programming that has become increasingly popular over the last several years is the integration of wilderness pursuits and outdoor opportunities with the somewhat traditional orientation activities.

The nature of today's college student has evolved and changed, as well as the challenges and issues that first-year students encounter. The challenge to higher education institutions is to meet the needs of these students and respond to their requests. Even though each institution is unique in the academic disciplines it offers, the culture that exists on a campus and the students it attracts, there are common services and approaches that can be taken. The charge to individual institutions is to develop an orientation program that meets the needs of the population of students attending that school and to fully expose them to the realm of available opportunities.

There have been various suggestions and trends in orientation programming in an effort to stay 'in tune' with students' desires and demands. An outdoor wilderness pursuit component coupled with an orientation program adds a great dimension to the services and opportunities a student can experience. "Selected universities have even demonstrated increased levels of retention among students that have participated in these wilderness orientation programs" (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996, p. 22). According to Astin (1993), given the importance of a student's first year, the orientation process and a student's level of campus involvement can have a positive impact on retention. Thus, innovative approaches to orienting students can have strong, lasting effects.

Retention Efforts

The retention of students is a great concern for higher education institutions. After spending a significant amount of time, energy, and financial resources recruiting students to attend an institution through publications, college fairs, and various other techniques, the institution then must turn its attention to retaining the student. Orientation has been identified as a crucial piece in an institution's attempt to ensure that a student will want to continue education at that institution following the first semester and year. Some administrators believe that "retention efforts need to begin before the freshman

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orientation program, perhaps as early as with the acceptance letter” (Berry, 1995, p. 163). However, more plausible action is to provide students with the types of experiences and opportunities they truly desire, while at the same time including a plethora of information throughout the orientation process. Gass (1990) argued that programs should be designed to “...assist students in their transition from high school to college by creating the necessary changes that enable students to stay in school and achieve their educational goals” (p. 33). Mullendore and Abraham (1993) contextualized orientation and its relationship with retention, noting that the positive correlation has also contributed to the surge in attention paid to orientation programs.

Wilderness Pursuit Activities

Outdoor wilderness pursuit orientation programs exist for a variety of different reasons and are defined in a variety of different ways. Some institutions consider an outdoor program to have components of a ropes course or other activities that take place outside. Other programs range from an overnight experience in cabins in the mountains, while still other programs consist of multiple day excursions into the backcountry. The purpose of such programs vary “from the aim of reducing the attrition rate, to promoting a more positive transition to college life, and to introducing students to the college’s outing program” (O’Keefe, 1989, p. 166). Individual institutions create programs that suit their unique student populations, based on a variety of factors ranging from costs to location availability.

A wilderness pursuit orientation program is a variation of the traditional on-campus orientation program. This type of program uses many of the strategies and basic structural techniques of social integration that would be found in an on-campus orientation. Wilderness pursuit orientation programs promote new student inclusiveness with the campus community, and “perhaps, students were able to more easily realize academic success as the result of personal and social successes on” the wilderness pursuit (Stremba, 1993, p. 203).

Outdoor wilderness pursuits components of orientation programs add to the documentation of the positive impact that many educators believe these programs have on the participants in achieving personal and social skills that will contribute to their overall education and that will eventually be carried over into the work place (O’Keefe, 1989, p. 166).

As institutions are continually searching for ways to be innovative and leaders in the field of higher education, a new wave in orientation programming has emerged. Lanza (1998) wrote that “outdoor orientation programs are particularly big with incoming freshman because they come away (from the outing) with an enhanced sense of community and important friendships” (p. 20). Also, it is a time for incoming students to interact with faculty and staff at the institution in an environment where they are free to ask questions and become familiar with some of the institution’s academic and curricular requirements. Therefore, this type of orientation program provides students with the information they need in their transition to college but does so in a unique setting. “As higher education today is being challenged to be accountable for the process of education

and the development of better citizens, so too are orientation programs scrutinized for their quality and effectiveness” (O’Keefe, 1989, p. 165). Several institutions have implemented the development of a wilderness pursuit orientation program that can accompany a traditional on-campus program or could be completely separate.

There are several institutions, the University of Puget Sound and the University of New Hampshire for example, that have comprehensive outdoor orientation programs for their incoming class of students. Both of these institutions have published articles and serve as models in the arena of outdoor orientation programming. One student who participated in the wilderness pursuit orientation program at the University of Puget Sound noted:

how much of a struggle it had been for him to reach the top of a mountain pass (one day of the program) and that initially he had seen this as not accomplishable. But then it occurred to him how many other things he tells himself are beyond his reach and which he therefore, does not attempt. ‘If I could climb this mountain,’ he said, ‘I can probably do a lot of other things I have been telling myself I can’t do’ (Stremba, 1993, p. 199).

Placing students in an environment that differs from ones in which they are accustomed encourages them to grow and explore in a way they previously might not have had the opportunity. “The wilderness represents a foreign, rather unique environment. It is thought that this change of setting would help facilitate change and growth” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996, p. 26).

The Program

Wilderness pursuit orientation programs are those that involve taking a small group of first-year students into a wilderness setting where backpacking and camping are the primary outdoor activities. This type of program includes a developed set of goals and a mission statement that guide the structure of the entire program. The wilderness pursuit orientation program is an addendum to the current on-campus orientation program and is not intended to replace the existing program. Rather, it enhances the students’ orientation experience and provides them with one more involved and unique opportunity to make connections with people prior to their first day of classes.

This program is developed in such a way that it relies on the strength and enthusiasm of the upper class student leaders who have an interest and some level of expertise in the outdoors. Several objectives are met by using current students as the leaders and facilitators on the wilderness pursuit orientation. First, the program provides an avenue for current students to serve as leaders and role models for incoming students. The venue is different and can attract students who are interested in the outdoors and may not participate as widely in other on-campus leadership areas. Secondly, the experience provides an opportunity for incoming students to begin to establish relationships with current students who can serve as mentors and answer questions, and at the same time to help students feel welcome in their new community.

The wilderness pursuit orientation program allows for students, both current and incoming, to spend a significant amount of intense time together. This extended period

truly provides a forum for incoming students to learn the academic and social expectations of the institution they are preparing to attend. By having a pre-existing relationship with older students prior to attending classes, new students can begin their academic career with a clearer understanding of the commitment and attitude it takes to be successful in college. Imperative to success is that upper class student leaders devote time and energy on their outings to educate and role model this information to new students.

Staff commitment, student participation, campus support and availability of locations are important things to take into consideration when determining when to offer the wilderness pursuit orientation program. Additionally, in planning this type of program, it is important not to interfere with current on-campus orientation program activities. Students should have the option to attend both orientations and not have to make a choice between the two because of scheduling conflicts.

Program Structure

There are three basic structures that a wilderness pursuit orientation program can take. Another variable that can be determined by an institution is the timing of such an orientation program. Wilderness pursuit programs can be held throughout the summer or just prior to classes beginning in the fall. Both of the options are plausible and will produce similar results for incoming students.

The first structure of a wilderness pursuit orientation program is one that is short in duration, lasting a single day. For institutions that are located in areas where outdoor activities are close in proximity, this is a likely option. This format will also work well for campuses that want a large number of students to participate in the activities but may not have a large budget dedicated to the program.

The essential elements of this structure are for students and their leaders to begin their wilderness pursuit activities early in the day and dedicate an entire day to programming and activity. The incoming students participate in activities instructed by upper class student leaders. Throughout the day of activity, intentional programming covering academics, social concerns, community, etc., are covered. For this type of program to be successful, it is crucial that students are placed in smaller groups, encouraging them to build relationships and get to know the other students in the group on a deeper level.

Determining student placement on different trips with other students can be decided by individual institutions and their orientation coordinators. The time on this trip is an opportunity to connect students to their floor if they are living on campus, to an athletic team or similar organization, or possibly to other students who have the same intended major. The exciting part surrounding this format is that it enables students to spend time with a small group of other new students and to begin to develop a similar experience in their collegiate career. Students will not only experience something in the wilderness through their trip, but will also begin the process of developing relationships.

The second form of a wilderness pursuit orientation program is that of a base camp. In this structure, students and their leaders have a camp area where they come and go

throughout the day but always return at night. This allows students to be able to participate in a wide variety of activities during the day without the concern of packing their food and gear from place to place. This type of program provides an appealing opportunity for students to receive intentional programming led by their instructors during the evening either around a campfire, in tents, etc.

The duration of the program can vary, acknowledging that the longer students are interacting with other students, the less superficial their relationships become. Again, the number of students should be limited to allow for smaller groups. However, several groups could use the same base camp simultaneously but participating wilderness activities separately.

The third structure of a wilderness pursuit orientation program is an extended trip. This format is more comprehensive not only for the students who participate, but also for those who plan and coordinate the trip. Extended trips require a larger budget and commitment by the staff to become adequately trained and competent in outdoor skills. During this type of outing, students are separated into smaller groups with student leaders who will spend the next six to ten days experiencing outdoor challenges and participating in intentional programming. Students on this trip are entirely self-supporting and rely on each other to make decisions. They spend a great deal of time experiencing activities through the wilderness that can be of greater difficulty, skill level, and more time consuming. Students and leaders also have the opportunity to interact on a different level because they are limited to their group. They learn to trust and rely on each other while at the same time forming their own small community in which every individual has a role and responsibility.

Any of these three formats can be taken and made to fit for an institution based on the established goal for the program. There are several important components that need to be consistent between the three forms of programs. First, the intentional programming surrounding academic issues, social adaptation, and expectations of community living need to be developed. Second, the smaller the group of students on the trip, without regard to which format is applied, the increased opportunity for interaction and relationship building. And third, the responsibility of the upper class student leaders to role model behavior and set forth a clear expectation of academic and social life at that institution is imperative to each trip.

Each institution needs to research the implications of developing and implementing a wilderness pursuit orientation program. Those implications include: the financial commitment that accompanies this type of program (e.g., personnel, equipment, etc.); the cost incurred by the students who want to attend; delegation of responsibility to staff members who already may have a “full-time” job; proximity to an appropriate geographic location; liability and legal issues of sponsoring this type of activity for a group of students; and the accessibility of offering this program to all students.

Liability Issues

Many administrators at higher education institutions immediately shut the door on wilderness pursuit orientation programs because of the perceived liability issues. There

are inherent risks associated with this type of programming, but there are initial steps that can be taken to help reduce the possibility of negative events occurring.

Properly training and educating the staff who are facilitating and leading the trips will reduce the occurrence of many negative incidents. Screening participants prior to the trip, having parental consent and knowledge of the expedition, and a signed comprehensive medical form from a physician enables the directors and leaders to be aware of possible areas of concern. All participants prior to their departure on a trip must sign an extensive liability waiver.

An exploration into the necessary insurance for this type of a program also needs to be conducted. Coordinating staff must determine if the school's insurance plan covers this type of program, and if not, what needs to be done to make sure that the pursuit is properly covered ahead of time. If the institution's insurance does not cover this sort of program, exploration into finding alternate forms of insurance should be conducted. The cost of arranging insurance solely for the wilderness pursuit could be added to the fee assessed to students who go on the trip. An exploration into the personal insurance of each student as a form of insuring the trip should be examined as well.

Additionally, studying the area in which the trip is taking place allows the staff and students to be aware of possible wildlife threats, landscape challenges, and environmental hazards. Establishing a relationship with the rangers and others who work in the wilderness area where the trip occurs will be beneficial. And finally, it is crucial to have a well thought out and developed plan in place to respond to an emergency.

Evaluation

The evaluative piece of conducting such a program is very important as it produces concrete data to share with campus administrators to determine the value of a wilderness pursuit orientation program. Evaluating and then tracking the impact a wilderness pursuit orientation program has on student retention can significantly influence the level of financial support for the program and to determine whether it should be continued. Evaluations of student participants provide directors with data to examine the program from previous years and make appropriate adjustments to create a stronger program for future classes of students. Also, it is important for the directors to receive input from staff, both student and faculty, who helped lead the program. This evaluation should reference the training they received prior to the orientation and an assessment of the program itself. These evaluations will assist in determining whether the current program design fulfills its goals and mission.

There are several ingredients that comprise the evaluation of a wilderness pursuit orientation program. A longitudinal study assessing the retention and involvement of students who participated in one of these orientation programs could be beneficial. This type of study is possible to conduct by taking a sample from the students whom participated in the wilderness pursuit orientation program and comparing them to a sample of students who did not. There are of course pieces that need to be taken into consideration that might skew the results, such as what type of students this kind of outdoor, optional program attracts from the beginning. Necessary would be the true

examination of the effects that this orientation program has on students to depict the many facets of student life. These include but are not limited to: a student's GPA after the first semester and throughout college, judicial actions on campus, leadership roles and activities involved in, extra-curricular involvement outside of the campus, and ultimately, the completion of a degree.

Conclusion

Learning through the environment contributes to the overall learning that will take place in the classroom by increasing a student's self-concept and achievement efforts. By completing a task they had previously thought insurmountable on a wilderness pursuit, this feeling of achievement can carry over into the academic setting and social interactions throughout campus. Lanza (1998) reported that at the University of New Hampshire, students who completed the wilderness orientation program were "25 percent less likely to drop out their first year, and their grade point averages are a quarter-point higher than average" (p. 20). Higher education institutions have acknowledged this transitional time as being difficult and have attempted to find ways in which to assist students during this confusing and unsettling time. This is evident in the growing number of orientation programs being offered across the country and the deeper commitment that orientation is receiving on college campuses. Assisting students in persisting at a college or university is beneficial to the institution and has become a public priority. Thus, institutions are finding themselves more willing to endorse and support programs that promote student retention.

Incorporating a wilderness pursuit orientation program prior to the beginning of the fall term allows students to begin to build a community with the other students who also participate in the experience. Thus, during the first several weeks on campus when students are forming personal connections and relationships with other students in their residence halls and classes, the students who participated in the wilderness pursuit orientation program have an already established network of peers and a support group. Another benefit to attending the outdoor orientation is that students were presented with the opportunity to interact with upper class students outside the formal setting of campus. The leaders of the trips had the opportunity to role model behavior and expectations for new students. Incoming students are afforded the time and the format to ask questions concerning academic life as well as engaging in co-curricular activities that promote a smoother transition into college. Students are encouraged and become more confident by their accomplishments on the wilderness pursuit, particularly those who participate in activities new to them. Using the outdoors as a tool to help students discover and know themselves better is an exciting and innovative method to enhance their personal growth and promote their retention and eventual graduation.

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