

Organizational Collaboration in Outdoor Adventure

Education – Executive Summary

Overview

The following is an executive summary of my thesis research conducted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Masters in Adventure Education at Prescott College in June 2007. The primary question the thesis sought to answer is, “what barriers are faced by higher education institutions to Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) program development?” This document summarizes the thesis, speculates on potential solutions to some barriers uncovered, and discusses potential field-wide implications.

Thesis summary

Some scholars are now choosing the phrase ‘outdoor adventure education’ to denote adventure education occurring primarily in the outdoors (Meyer & Wenger, 1998; Sheard & Golby 2006; Raiola, 2003). OAE uses the process of experiential learning to develop environmental sensitivity, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills through the conscientious introduction and management of risk and challenge in the outdoors (Kraft & Sakofs, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1938; Priest 1990). OAE is one of many teaching *applications* that uses the experiential learning process as a teaching method.

The growth of outdoor adventure education in North America owes much to pioneering outdoor educators and organizational founders like Kurt Hahn, Josh Miner, and Paul Petzoldt, who developed and promoted methods of using the outdoors to successfully teach leadership, character development and environmental stewardship to students of all ages. The varying goals and philosophical emphasis of the large OAE non-profit organizations formed in the 1960’s and 70’s have led to the diverse field of outdoor adventure education found today. There are common goals among OAE providers, such as promoting self-actualization, experiential learning techniques, leadership skills and environmental awareness, however, teaching techniques and effectiveness vary. (See Table 1 at the end of the text for a comparison of external OAE providers.) While several decades of anecdotal evidence indicates that most of these programs are effective, rigorous research and meta-analyses remain to be done that will answer how and why some techniques and programs are more effective than others.

Virtually since their beginning, the large, non-degree granting providers have worked with institutes of higher education to assist in the growth of outdoor adventure based programming in colleges and universities (Medrick, 1973; Priest & Gass, 2005). Over the last three decades, these external OAE providers have developed a variety of training programs and consulting services for higher education. Some of these include: trip leader training, printed and electronic educational resources, co-led trips and programs, risk management training, wilderness medical training for staff and students, outdoor leader certification, program accreditation, internships for college students, and off-campus educational programs for college credit (NOLS, 2007b; WEA, 2006; SCA, 2007a; OB, 2007a). To date, most interactions between higher education and external providers have been short-term transactional relationships where one or more of these products are purchased. Despite some efforts of umbrella organizations like the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) and the Association for Outdoor Recreation Education (AORE), a spirit of competition appears to exist between the colleges and universities themselves, between the external providers, and in some cases, between the external providers and higher education (Colorado, personal communication, January 25, 2007; New York, personal communication, January 24, 2007).

A review of the literature from business scholars reveals a variety of successful models for organizational alliances. While some alliances may become management service organizations, parent corporations, or mergers, initial forays into partnership are commonly joint ventures (Arsenault, 1998). Joint ventures typically begin as contracts for short-term projects that allow organizations to analyze their aligned mission and values before making serious investments in the relationship (Kanter, 1994). In other fields and industries successful collaborative efforts do exist between both direct and indirect competitors in both the for- and non-profit sectors (Hamel, et al, 1989; Bengtsson & Kock, 2000).

Through the mixed methodology of a written and online questionnaire and follow-up phone interviews with selected respondents, the present study tested four hypotheses as a means of exploring the thesis:

- 1) *Outdoor adventure programs in higher education need assistance with design, training, or delivery,*
- 2) *Outdoor leadership-related program staff and administrators in higher education accurately perceive which products and services are currently offered by the large non-degree granting OAE providers,*
- 3) *Outdoor leadership-related program staff and administrators in higher education believe that custom services offered by external OAE providers are financially affordable for higher education programs,*
- 4) *Outdoor leadership-related program staff and administrators in higher education perceive a need for products or services that are currently unavailable.*

Conclusions

The cumulative quantitative and qualitative data supports the rejection of all but the first hypothesis. As expected the research confirmed **a need for assistance with program design, training, and delivery**. This need was demonstrated by the high percentage (57%) of higher education programs that are currently using external providers for a variety of services (including wilderness medical training).

Among college OAE program directors and staff, there is common **concern about inadequate training and risk management practices**, particularly for student-run programs where there is high annual turnover. Both the qualitative and quantitative data showed a perceived need for risk management training at the field and administrative levels in higher education.

At many colleges with academic programs, the first generation of faculty to deliver these academic OAE programs is starting to retire. Some faculty are spending less time in the field, meaning that **some students are graduating from degree programs with less field experience** than in the past.

Product awareness for custom services offered by external providers to higher education is remarkably low even among former employees and program graduates of those external providers. Where external providers are actively marketing custom services to higher education, these efforts appear to be failing. One questionnaire respondent called for “better advertising that reaches newer programs easier.”

Custom offerings from external OAE providers are widely perceived to be unaffordable for higher education. Data from three survey questions and several phone interviewees indicated concern that college programs simply could not afford to purchase “custom services” from an external provider.

There is a perceived need for assistance in **acquiring and maintaining federal land-use permits** to travel on public lands in the US. Both data sets indicated a concern over access to federal lands and suggestions that external providers might be able to help either with lobbying efforts or permit acquisition.

Higher education OAE programs vary dramatically in terms of funding sources, the title and role of key decision makers, enrollment/participation challenges, their department's location within the university, relationships with other outdoor organizations both inside their college or university and out, and training standards and practices for trip leaders.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that well-funded small academic programs or large, start-up recreation programs for example, would be more likely to seek assistance from external providers. Data showed **no correlation between program characteristics** (aside from "adequate funding") **and a history of seeking external assistance**. The quantitative data showed no statistically significant differences in stated needs between users and non-users of external OAE providers. One of the few correlations that could be established was between the size (in annual participant days) and recreation vs. academic programs. **Pure recreation programs tend to be much larger in terms of annual participant days.**

Some established higher education OAE programs do not need external assistance. These programs tend to be large, older, and interdepartmental. The larger programs often have both recreation and academic departments that work together successfully by sharing rental equipment, co-leading wilderness trips, and offering programs to other schools and the general public. These self-sufficient programs are often characterized by their employment of non-faculty professional staff who provide continuity by training student employee and volunteer leaders from year to year.

Most organizational relationships between higher education programs and external providers are short-lived and transactional. While there are a few cases where long-term partnerships have formed, a simple purchase of services is much more common. The affiliation programs which allow college students to take courses from external providers for college credit do not correlate to deeper levels of partnership or mutual trade for services. Many of the programs with college credit agreements with external providers do not use external providers for other services.

Implications for the field

This thesis evaluated the growth and development needs of outdoor adventure programs in higher education using quantitative and qualitative methods. It is accepted that the findings from this convenience sampling has limited statistical significance in some areas. A larger study using nationwide random sampling might strengthen these findings. However, the contribution to the field of outdoor adventure education is in the form of:

- Identifying areas of need for assistance in higher education programs by segment;
- Providing comparative analysis of the products and services historically available to higher education from external providers based on previous literature; and
- Providing an overview of common organizational interactions in OAE.

Areas of need in higher education programs by segment

While the emergent themes related to needs and segmentation did not have overwhelming statistical significance in this study, some needs were more often voiced by certain types or segments of higher education. Higher education OAE programs may be loosely categorized into four segments, all of which state equal need for wilderness medical training for their staff.

Segment 1 consists of large (300+ annual participants per year) established (10 years old+) programs that function interdepartmentally within their college or university. These programs offer both recreation and academic trips and are characterized by the employment of non-faculty professional staff. Oversight is typically given to a director who reports to the dean of student (or less often, academic) affairs. Students commonly have both volunteer and employment

opportunities within these programs. With a few notable exceptions, these large programs tend to be located at universities rather than community colleges. Recreation trips are often co-led by student leaders in the academic program and serve as a recruiting tool to bring other students at the university into the academic program. While segment 1 programs are least likely to need external assistance, needs may include: wilderness medical training for staff and students, skills certifications for students, accreditation, and college credit affiliate agreements.

Segment 2 is comprised of entirely academic programs. These tend to be smaller in terms of annual participants and are housed in the academic affairs department. Trips are most often led or co-led by faculty. Common needs for segment 2 include: textbooks, assistance leading trips (from an external provider or an external professional contracted as adjunct faculty), skills certifications for students, assistance with logistical support or land-use permitting.

Segment 3 is comprised of pure recreation programs that offer non-credit wilderness trips. While they are not technically outdoor adventure “education” programs, most contain some educational elements, even though education is not the primary focus of their trips. Recreation programs tend to offer student employment and volunteer opportunities, such as implementing an equipment rental program. Segment 3 needs include external wilderness trips run during winter or spring breaks in the academic calendar year, trip leader training for staff and students, risk management training,

Segment 4 consists of student-run wilderness orientation programs and outing clubs. These typically operate through the student affairs department. The most common needs for segment 4 are student trip leader training and co-led trips.

Table 2
Higher Education Program Needs by Segment

	Segment 1 Interdepartmental	Segment 2 Academic	Segment 3 Recreation	Segment 4 Outing Club / Orientation
Defining Characteristics	Both academic and recreational trips run by same dept.	Smaller programs,	Gear rental programs, operated by student affairs,	Operated by student affairs
Trip Leaders	Faculty, students, professional staff	Faculty, subcontractors	Professional staff, students, subcontractors	Students
Commonly Stated Needs	Wilderness medical training for students, accreditation, textbooks, risk management training, affiliate agreements	Wilderness medical training for students, professional co- leaders, skills certifications, textbooks, student internships	Trip leader training, trips during spring and winter breaks, risk management training	Trip leader training for students, risk management training

Organizational interactions in outdoor adventure education

Zooming back out to the industry (or field) level, there are three traditional ways that organizations interact within any given industry—they compete, collaborate, or have a “supplier”

relationship in which they buy and sell each other products or services. As business scholars are quick to point out, the idea that every interaction between any two organizations within an industry will always fall into the same category is a gross oversimplification of today's much more complex market places (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Myers, 1996; Kanter, 1994). For example, two organizations may simultaneously compete and collaborate while one is also serving as a supplier for the other.

College and university outdoor adventure education programs may interact with external providers and with each other in all three ways. Based on the present research, higher education competes with external providers: for college students interested in recreational wilderness trips during breaks in the academic calendar, for college students interested in outdoor skills acquisition either for credit or recreation, for faculty, for wilderness 'classroom' areas, and less often, for members of the general public interested in outdoor leadership development or teambuilding. External providers commonly act as suppliers for higher education by selling them services--custom programming, wilderness medical training, certification, risk management training, accreditation etc. External providers and higher education programs collaborate when they willingly share staff, trade information on best practices, jointly participate in conferences, research projects, and publications, and trade services.

The competitor relationship and supplier/transactional relationship seem to be widely recognized at all levels in higher education OAE programs. The collaborative relationship, which requires the most time and effort to develop, often goes unrecognized and undervalued. With the exception of a few noteworthy examples (OB and Unity College, NOLS and the Wharton School, Project Adventure and Plymouth State) long-term, multifaceted partnerships tend to be rare and short-lived. Many will take the first step, a joint venture or contract, but few will go on to build covenants. College OAE programs more often view an external provider as either a competitor or supplier. This tendency holds even among educational programs with very similar cultures, methods, and educational goals.

The present research indicated that higher education program staff who are former employees of external providers tend to return to those providers years later to purchase services for their college programs. While it is not surprising that one would gravitate to what she knows, it is interesting to speculate whether these programs are always getting the best matches for their needs. Each college program must have a system for pairing its own unique program needs with the external provider that will make the best long-term partner. While transactional relationships tend to reinforce transactional thinking, these interactions should be approached instead as learning opportunities.

The best relationships new college programs can hope to have with external providers mirror the relationships between international development agencies, like the Peace Corps, and their foreign counterpart organizations. The external "experts" are there to assist the host organization in becoming self-sufficient. They train the trainers until the trainers can continue training others. As with Colorado Outward Bound assisting Prescott College to launch its wilderness orientation program decades ago, there does not need to be a lifetime of reliance on the external provider. But the research has shown that funding is clearly a problem. So what other interests might the external providers have in the success of higher education programs? An interviewee from Colorado describes the current state of organizational relationships in OAE this way,

You know if you look at anything in nature, there's a lot of competition, but there's a lot of collaboration too, and you just have to weigh the costs. If the costs of not collaborating are greater than collaborating, you should do it. I think that we're finding that with the new influx of wildland users on the rise today, collaboration is going to benefit us better than our old paradigm" (Colorado, personal communication, January 25, 2007).

The cost of not collaborating could already be a field of education that languishes, struggles, and remains somehow on the fringe of mainstream education for years to come.

Umbrella organizations in outdoor adventure education host conferences and email listserves and publish academic journals aimed at increasing the dialogue between all of the stakeholders in the field. While these discussion forums are tremendously valuable for adventure education, they are necessary but not sufficient for the development of inter-organizational collaboration. If we learn best through experience at the individual level, perhaps the same can be said of our organizational learning. If that is the case then publications, email, and lectures may not be the ideal for sharing best practices. It may be that experiential learning at the organizational level means visiting other programs, co-teaching, and perhaps even spending time in the wilderness together. Identifying common program needs is just the first step off the pavement.

A final word

As with any successful wilderness expedition we must, as a group, recognize how to leverage the strength of others toward our mutual goals. In the field of outdoor adventure education our common goal is to share the power of learning through outdoor adventure experiences. Brendenburger & Nalebuff remind us that “universities, though they compete with one another for students and faculty, are complementors in creating the market for higher education in the first place” (1996, p.26). The same could be said of the external providers in the case of outdoor education. Just as a high profile death, for example, is bad for the whole, information sharing and collaboration at the organizational level is good for the whole.

Table 1
Course Characteristic Comparison of Primary AE Providers

Course characteristics	OB	SCA	WEA	NOLS	PA
Group sizes	8-15 for wilderness, 8+ for custom courses	Internships, 10+ for conservation programs	10-20	8-15 for wilderness, 8+ for custom courses	School class sizes, 5+ for custom programs
Participants / Students	All ages, professionals, college students, adjudicated youth, Youth-at-risk	Volunteer students of all ages and levels.	College students and staff	Ages 15 and over, college students, professionals, government.	Primary and secondary schools, youth-at-risk, college students, professionals, grad students, teachers
Primary Physical Environments	wilderness, oceans, urban settings, worldwide	Wilderness, Federal and state Lands in the US. Urban parks and green spaces.	Wilderness worldwide.	wilderness, oceans, worldwide	Urban and rural settings, classrooms, gymnasiums, business locations world wide.
Activities	Ropes courses, dog sledding, Hiking, rock-climbing, mountaineering, sailing, whitewater paddling, seakayaing, caving, skiing, snowboarding, winter camping, horse packing.	Local, state, and national conservation-related service projects. Hiking and rafting. Internships may involve wilderness travel of all kinds.	Hiking, backcountry camping	Hiking, rock-climbing, mountaineering, sailing, whitewater paddling, seakayaing, caving, skiing, snowboarding, winter camping, horse packing, fly fishing, canyoneering.	Ropes/challenge courses, games/initiatives, wide variety of group-related indoor / outdoor activities.
Course Length	1 (custom)-80+ days (semester)	2-days (urban)-12 months (internship)	Several days to several weeks	1 (custom)-90 days (semester)	1 day events to year-long AE masters program.
Higher Ed. Offerings	College credit, custom courses, staff training, program consultation, textbooks	Internships	Direct college credit, certification courses, staff training, textbooks	College credit, internships, custom courses, staff training, risk management training and consultation, textbooks, wilderness med. training	Masters degree, undergraduate and graduate credit, facilities-based program consultation and accreditation, textbooks

(NOLS, 2007a; OB, 2007a; WEA, 2006; SCA, 2007a; Project Adventure, 2007a).

References

(for complete Bibliography, see the full-length thesis)

- Arsenault, J. (1998). *Forging nonprofit alliances*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Boldt, J., & Miner, J. L. (1981). *Outward Bound USA: Learning through experience in adventure-based education*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.
- Nalebuff, B. (1996). *Co-opetition*. Oskarshamn: ISL Forlag AB.
- Dewey, John. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Collier Books.
- Hattie, J., Marsh, H.W., Neill, J. & Richards, G.E. (1997). Adventure education and Outward Bound: Out-of-class experiences that make a lasting difference. *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 43-87.
- Kanter, R. M. (1994). Collaborative advantage: The art of alliances. In Harvard Business School Press. *Harvard Business Review on Strategic Alliances*, (97-128). Boston, MA: HBS Press.
- Kellert, S.R. (1998). *A national study of outdoor wilderness experience*. Unpublished Paper For Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Retrieved September, 10, 2005, from <http://www.nols.edu/resources/research/pdfs/kellert.complete.text.pdf>
- Kraft, R., & Sakofs, M. (Eds.), (1985). *The theory of experiential education*. Boulder, Colorado: Association for Experiential Education.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Medrick, R. (1973). *Outward Bound and higher education: A rationale and outline for college development*. Denver, CO: Colorado Outward Bound School.
- Meyer, B. B., & Wenger, M. S. (1998). Athletes and adventure education: An empirical investigation. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 29, 243-266.
- Miles, J. C., & Priest, S. (Eds.), (1990). *Adventure education*. State College, PA: Venture Pub.
- National Outdoor Leadership School Website (2007a). Retrieved January 29, 2007 from <http://www.nols.edu/news/nolsfacts.shtml>.
- National Outdoor Leadership School Website (2007b). Retrieved January 29, 2007 from <http://www.nols.edu/nolspro/>.
- National Outdoor Leadership School Website (2007c). Retrieved January 29, 2007 from <http://www.nols.edu/resources/research/abstracts.shtml>.
- National Outdoor Leadership School Website (2007d). Retrieved February 15, 2007 from <http://www.nols.edu>.
- National Outdoor Leadership School Website (2007e). Retrieved February 20, 2007 from <http://www.nols.edu/wrmc/>.
- National Outdoor Leadership School (2006). *NOLS 2006 Catalogue of Courses*. Lander, WY; NOLS.
- Outward Bound Website. (2007a). Retrieved January 26, 2007 from <http://www.outwardbound.org/history.vp.html>.
- Outward Bound Wilderness Website. (2007b). Retrieved January 26, 2007 from <http://www.outwardboundwilderness.org/whatis.html>.
- Outward Bound Wilderness Website. (2007c). Retrieved January 26, 2007 from

- <http://www.outwardboundwilderness.org/activity/multi-expedition.html>.
- Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning Schools Website. (2007d). Retrieved March 30, 2007 from <http://www.elschools.org/index.html>.
- Priest, S. (1990a). The semantics of adventure education. In Miles, J.C., & Priest, Simon (Eds.). *Adventure Education*, (113-118). State College, PA: Venture Pub.
- Project Adventure. (2007a). Retrieved on February 26, 2007 from <http://www.pa.org/programs/index.php>
- Project Adventure. (2007b). Retrieved on February 26, 2007 from <http://www.pa.org/credentialing/>.
- Raiola, E. (2003). Communication and problem solving in extended field-based outdoor adventure education courses. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 26(1), 50-54.
- Sheard, J. & Golby, M. (2006). The Efficacy of an Outdoor Adventure Education Curriculum on Selected Aspects of Positive Psychological Development. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 29(2), 187.
- Student Conservation Association Website (2007a). Retrieved February 27, 2007 from <http://www.thesca.org/>.
- Student Conservation Association Website (2007b). Retrieved February 27, 2007 from <http://www.thesca.org/explore.cfm>.
- Student Conservation Association Website (2007a). Retrieved February 27, 2007 from http://www.thesca.org/con_crews.cfm.
- Wilderness Education Association. (2005) *WEA 's 2005 conference proceedings*. Retrieved September 10, 2005 from http://www.weainfo.org/WEA_Conf_Proceedings_05.pdf
- Wilderness Education Association Website. (2006). Retrieved February 25, 2006 from <http://www.weainfo.org/welcome.html>.
- Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS Website (2006). Retrieved March 12, 2006 from <http://www.nols.edu/wmi/about/>.