Wilderness orientation programs: their impact on student development and retention

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Abstract
This paper is designed to accomplish two purposes. First, I will examine current writings and research on orientation programs in general and on Wilderness Orientation Programs and look at how these particular forms of orientation programs are benefiting colleges and universities in terms of student development and retention. Second, in an attempt to further analyze Wilderness Orientation Programs in the light of student development, I will apply Klein's Framework and Chickering's Seven Vectors to the concepts of Wilderness Orientation Programs. I will conclude with recommendations for further research.
WILDERNESS ORIENTATION PROGRAMS:
THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION

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Introduction

Orientation may be defined as any effort on the part of a college or university to help entering students make transitions from their previous environments to their collegiate environments and to enhance their potential for success in college (Farnsworth & Upcraft, 1984). Institutions range from having the traditional one-day orientation to week-long orientation sessions to wilderness orientation for new students. However, whatever form their orientations take, institutions seem to agree that students need to feel some connection to the university or college when the program is over.

This paper is designed to accomplish two purposes. First, I will examine current writings and research on orientation programs in general and on Wilderness Orientation Programs and look at how these particular forms of orientation programs are benefiting colleges and universities in terms of student development and retention. Second, in an attempt to further analyze Wilderness Orientation Programs in the light of student development, I will apply Klein’s Framework and Chickering’s Seven Vectors to the concepts of Wilderness Orientation Programs. I will conclude with recommendations for further research.

Wilderness Orientation Programs

Wilderness Orientation Programs are identified as programs designed to facilitate students’ transition to campus by using the elements of an outdoor environment (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996). Wilderness Orientation Programs can also be identified by their purposes and goals, and designs and structures.
Purpose and Goals

Orientation programs are conceptualized and implemented in different ways by colleges and universities, but Gass and Kerr (1986) identified eight goals central to most orientation programs:

1. Attachment to a positive and meaningful peer group
2. Significant interaction with faculty members (both in quality and quantity)
3. A clear focus on career development and major course of study
4. A challenging and stimulating academic program
5. Adequate preparation for college work
6. Compatibility between student expectations and university actualities
7. Positive use of campus facilities and high involvement in campus activities
8. Positive self-concept (p. 321)

Many schools have implemented either alternative or supplementary programs, such as wilderness orientation programs, in place of traditional orientation sessions. "Most colleges and universities that adapted wilderness orientation programs have done so because they have found that a wilderness type of environment helped reach the goals of their programs more than traditional orientation programs" (Gass & Kerr, 1986, p. 321). In some universities, wilderness orientation programs are used for retention; in some they are designed to ease the transition to college; and in others, they are provided as a way to acquaint new students to the university’s outdoor programs (Gass, 1983).

Retention rates are an important issue on every campus (Gass, 1990), in that as many as 40% of students do not complete their degree programs (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1996). How can colleges and universities get more students to enroll and how do they
keep them there once they do come? One place to start is in the orientation programs. “The commitment and energies which a university puts into the adjustment, retention, and development of new students says a great deal about the quality of that university” (Brown, 1998, p. 17). In colleges and universities that have started using Wilderness Orientation Programs, attrition rates were the number one rationale for doing so (Gass, 1987).

Design and Structure

Just as the purposes and goals of Wilderness Orientation Programs vary, so do the designs and structures of the programs. One program, used by University of New Hampshire, is the Summer Fireside Experience. This is a five-day program that is offered to first-year students prior to the first day of classes. Students, staff, and faculty spend five days together in an outdoor environment similar to camping. Some of the activities include initiative tasks, camp responsibilities, rock climbing, backpacking, long-distance runs, service projects, night discussions with a variety of faculty members, solo and expedition planning, and goal setting sessions (Gass & Kerr, 1986). In addition to the five-day program, follow-up experiences are provided throughout the first semester to strengthen the experience. These include weekend canoeing trips, volunteer service, and rock climbing reunion trips with faculty where goals that were set during the five-day program are revisited.

The design and structure of Wilderness Orientation Programs can be evaluated in relationship to student development and retention. One way is to relate the programs to theory and frameworks already being used in higher education. Klein (1997) introduced a framework in order to coordinate the principles of the wilderness expedition to the
traditional school environment. It included four parts: immersion, experimentation, creation, and implementation. This framework is based around the idea that learning doesn’t stop in the classroom. In order for students to really benefit from education, they need to connect what they know with what they can do.


Review of the Literature

In reviewing the research literature on Wilderness Orientation Programs, two ways to view the success of programs seemed to emerge. One aspect is how Wilderness Orientation Programs affect student development. The other measure of success is in the retention rates of students who have gone through some type of Wilderness Orientation Program.

Impact of Wilderness Orientation Programs on Student Development

How Wilderness Orientation Programs contribute to student development is a subject that has received little attention from researchers. “A large portion of the literature on wilderness orientation programs is unpublished or not published in refereed journals...limiting access to program information” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996, p. 23). Davis-Berman and Berman concluded that most universities found that follow-up and evaluation activities were lacking in many programs.
Though the research is limited on the effects of Wilderness Orientation Programs, the literature that has been written on the programs is in support of them. Strong reasons are given as to how orientation programs can benefit students. Klein (1997) stated that:

...participants form, in effect, small learning communities that must learn to think and act based on the collective wisdom of the members. Thus participants came away with a sense of what is important to themselves in relation to the larger community. They also come away with the skills and tools to create and sustain learning communities of their own. (p. 19)

Why the outdoors? Stogner stated in 1978 that “life involves risks, and yet most of today’s youth are protected from any unnecessary danger to such a degree that they have been insulated and isolated from risk” (p. 1). That statement is perhaps even truer about students entering college for the first time today. Stogner proposed that a wilderness experience would provide the opportunity for development of group dynamics and self-examination. He also thought that we should deal with the problems students have from their perspectives. “By identifying and implementing a procedure which expands the student’s self-concept and which can be shown to be related to academic performance, a school or college might ensure a greater degree of academic success in its students” (Strogner, 1978, p.3).

The outdoor environment is conducive to reaching the goals of Wilderness Orientation Programs. The wilderness environment represents a foreign, rather unique experience that helps facilitate change and growth (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996). “Dealing with challenging tasks and associated anxieties which accompany them, the individual adapts and changes” (Gass & Kerr, 1986, p. 322). Gass and Kerr (1986)
researched the Fireside and Summer Fireside Experience Programs at the University of
New Hampshire. One goal of the Fireside Experience Program was to help student
development as long as the students were members of the university community. The
Summer Fireside Program’s main focus was to help acclimate students to the college
environment. Gass and Kerr’s initial research on the two programs at the University of
New Hampshire indicated that the programs were successful in reaching the goals of
student adjustment and development.

Wilderness orientation programs are often built from the ideas of experiential
learning. Carver (1996) presented a lens for looking at experiential education that makes
it clear to someone without an experiential education background. Experiential education
is education that makes conscious application of the students’ experiences by integrating
them into the curriculum, according to Carver. Further, experiential education is holistic
in the sense that it addresses students in their entirety as thinking, feeling, physical,
emotional, spiritual and social beings. She provided a framework that instructors could
use when incorporating experiential learning into a program.

Theory of experiential education has been developed in several areas including
philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The framework that I present draws on
these disciplines as well as anthropology, cognitive science and research on
education. It belongs to no one camp. It is grounded in the wisdom that shapes
the voices and actions of experiential educators in a broad variety of settings.
(Carver, 1996, p. 8)

Wilderness Orientation Programs have also been built from the ideas and goals of
Outward Bound. Klein (1997) compared creating learning communities with the goals of
Outward Bound and suggested the design principles of the two programs are essentially the same.

1. Students have choices about how and what they learn. The choices expand when the students take on more responsibility for their learning.

2. Curriculum is a tool (not an end result) that follows a progression of learning based on the metaphor of a journey or an expedition.

3. Students will be assessed on their ability to produce their best work.

4. Curricula will include a systems approach and focus on how our systems interact with one another.

5. Relevant service to community is important as demonstrated through thoughtful action.

6. Curricula will include thematic, interdisciplinary projects.

7. Cooperative learning will be a component (not used exclusively) of all projects.

8. The ability to learn and act from information (versus simply know information) should be fostered.

9. Curricula will include a focus on fitness (emotional, physical, and mental).

10. Curricula will include the art and practice of creating, including a focus on the skills of reflection. (p. 19-20)

The Outward Bound experience is based on training, main, and final expeditions that take place in different wilderness settings. It is believed that after a student goes home is when the real Outward Bound experience begins. “Implementing what you have learned when you get back to the home place typically involves risk and courage, whether it is how you interact with your family or serve the community” (Klein, 1997, p. 21).
Wilderness Orientation Programs and Student Retention

As we enter the 21st century, the issue of retention is a growing concern for many colleges and universities. Reasons for institutions' concerns on this issue are often attributed to fewer numbers of potential college applicants and the financial and personnel losses suffered by the institution when students fail to complete their undergraduate education (Gass, 1990). Institutions are realizing that one way to connect with students and keep them on their campuses is to develop innovative approaches to orientation (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996).

Some Wilderness Orientation Programs are specifically designed to reduce student attrition and assist in the development of first year students at a university. The results of the study by Gass (1987) showed that the Wilderness Orientation Program positively influenced the retention of first year students at the University of New Hampshire. He also found that the success of such a program was partially dependent upon the transfer and follow-up exercises that occurred throughout the participant's first year of school. In light of these findings, it is recommended that colleges and universities view wilderness orientation programs as a year-long process. "Wilderness orientation programs without application or relevance to the adjustment and ongoing development are of limited value" (Gass & Kerr, 1986, p. 327).

Are there positive longitudinal benefits for Wilderness Orientation Programs on student retention? Gass (1990) found that programs that achieved their goals did so because they looked at retention as a complex interaction of specific academic and social variables. In his 1987 study, Gass compared the effectiveness of a supplemental 5-day
adventure-based orientation program, called the Summer Fireside Experience Program (SFEP), with two other orientation programs.

At the beginning of the students' second year, the Fireside program group had significantly greater retention than either of the other groups. The wilderness orientation group also had significantly higher grade point averages than the other two groups. Finally, the wilderness participants had significantly higher scores in developing autonomy, interpersonal relationships, interdependence, tolerance, and developing relationships with the opposite sex as compared to both the other groups. (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996, p. 23)

Another school that offers a Wilderness Orientation Program is Salisbury State University in Maryland. Salisbury State offers three types of orientation programs: traditional classroom sessions that meet for five weeks, twice each week; alternative orientation options such as Habitat for Humanity, nursing, military science, etc. and an outdoor experience such as canoeing in Canada, cycling in Maine, or sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. Brown (1998) compared the three programs and looked at which type of program was most beneficial in adjustment, retention, and development of new students. Brown (1998) “found that generally, enrollees in the outdoor program had better adjustment and higher retention rates than did enrollees in the alternative and classroom programs” (p.21).

An Application of Klien and Chickering to Wilderness Orientation Programs

“Student services professionals are practical people and rightly so...so why bother with theory” (Dannells, 1993, pg. 9)? The reasons for using theories and frameworks are to “test our work against them, check the goodness of our outcomes, and craft the kinds
of quality programs that characterize professionalism in our work” (Dannells, 1993, pg. 9-10). In this section, I will look at two different Wilderness Orientation Programs and how their designs and goals can be examined in accordance with a framework and theory already in place for student development.

Klein (1997) used the following framework as a way to link the ideas of the wilderness experience with the traditional classroom.

**Immersion:** Students discover a need to find out about a particular topic or theme.

**Experimentation:** Students test their assumptions and gather data and experience relevant to their theme.

**Creation:** Students illustrate what they have learned by preparing a product or products.

**Implementation:** Students transfer what they have learned in the form of service to their communities. (p. 21)

One example of how institutions are linking wilderness ideas with classroom experiences is New College in South Florida. Since 1992, New College has been conducting expeditions in the Florida Everglades. The faculty incorporate a nine-day Outward Bound experience into their curriculum. One popular expedition included students reading about local settlers from 1900 in Peter Mathiessen’s book, *The Killing of Mister Watson.* After the class read the book, they explored the area that the settlers first lived in and went to Chokoloskee Island where Mr. Watson was shot and killed (Klein, 1997).

This is just one example of how bringing the wilderness element into the classroom or orientation setting can have an impact on student learning and involvement.
Klein also emphasizes the importance of training for faculty and staff in order for this type of program to be successful. Most of his ideas are not new, but rather ideas that have not been tried. Klein envisions an educational system in which learning expeditions are common practice for kindergarten through university.

There are numerous theories that look at college student development and the interaction of students and their environments. “Arthur Chickering’s theory of identity development (Chickering, 1969; Thomas & Chickering, 1984) builds on the work of Erikson and Sanford and is perhaps the most influential of all psychological theories in its focus on traditional-aged college students and its prescriptive value in student affairs programming” (Dannells, 1993, pg. 11).

Evans (1996) lists Chickering’s seven vectors as: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity “Taking risks, meeting challenges, and interacting with others amplifies the development process along these areas of student development” (Brown, 1998, p.17).

How do the Seven Vectors relate to a Wilderness Orientation Program? “An adapted Outward Bound program model has been designed at the University of New Hampshire to assist students in reaching certain objectives through direct experiences with themselves, other individuals, and the environment” (Gass, 1983, pg. 10). This program, called “Summer Fireside” and its activities can be applied to Chickering’s Seven Vectors.

1. Developing Competence (intellectual physical/manual, and interpersonal)
Activities include: organizing, packing, hiking, backpacking, rock climbing, ropes course and rappelling. The physical aspect of these tasks challenges students and they have to communicate with the other members of the group, whom they have just met, to succeed in some of the tasks.

2. Becoming Autonomous (free of restrictive dependence on others)

When the experience begins, the students work in groups and depend on the leader to guide them. Most Wilderness Orientation Programs include a solo experience at the end of the program that provides the student with an opportunity to evaluate their self-concept and develop responsibility for their own behavior. Throughout the program, students are also encouraged to keep a journal of their experience and discoveries of themselves.

3. Managing Emotions (awareness and control)

Most students who go through a Wilderness Orientation Program will experience things they never have before. They will be tired, hungry, sore, but still expected to participate and accomplish the assigned tasks.

4. Establishing Identity (increasing clearer sense of self)

The whole experience is learning about one’s strengths and weaknesses. The facilitators plan discussions throughout the week that help students discuss and reflect on what they are going through and how that can be applied back on campus.

5. Freeing Interpersonal Relationships (increasing tolerance and capacity for intimacy)

The Summer Fireside program provides the students with the chance to begin healthy relationships with peers. They have discussions on the role of males and females in our
society and at school. They group is also required to work together on a service project at the end of the program.

6. Developing Purpose (sense of direction)
Many students come to college with no idea of what they want to major in or what career they want to pursue. The Summer Fireside program places “students in an environment which will enable them to match personal expectations, plans for an intended major, and thoughts concerning possible career plans with opportunities available to them at the University” (Gass, 1983, pg. 10). This is emphasized through solo and night discussions.

7. Developing Integrity (defining a set of personalized and consistent values)
This is something that will be developed over time, but can get a good start during the program. There are discussions on what is expected of the students once they are on the campus. Also, the solo experience and journaling would help the student identify some values.

This application of Chickering and Klein to Wilderness Orientation Programs reveals how theory can be applied in the development of Wilderness Orientation Programs. Chickering’s theory works well in application to Wilderness Orientation Programs because Chickering believes that new students will learn and develop as they invest in a new environment. There are many factors that go into determining the success of Wilderness Orientation Programs. Brown (1998) concluded that “because outdoor enrollees were involved with peers, faculty and staff, and were required to invest significant amounts of time and energy into a challenging experience, outdoor orientation programs were deemed as having beneficial development qualities” (p. 22).
Further Research and Assessment on Wilderness Orientation Programs

The idea of Wilderness Orientation Programs has been described in the literature as an effective way in which to promote student development and retention. The programs also need to be able to demonstrate that the skills learned during the experiences transfer into everyday college life. While many colleges and universities are using the ideas from Wilderness Orientation Programs, few are doing any sort of research or assessment as to the effects of such programs on student development and retention.

Why is Further Research Needed?

Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, uses a program called "Ropes" as an alternative orientation program. Students can volunteer to come to campus two days before the traditional orientation program begins in the Fall Semester and participate in the Ropes program. The program consists of worship, a ropes course, camping, and campfire activities. After the group returns to campus, they meet as a group during the first 6 weeks of classes and complete a service project during the first year at Wartburg (V. Edelnant, personal communication, December 15, 1999).

The College distributes a satisfaction survey at the end of the program, but does no other assessment as to the effects of student development or retention rates. Why should Wartburg be conducting some sort of assessment of their program? Because resources are declining in some colleges and universities, it is important to evaluate whether student services and programs are really necessary (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996). Further, Wartburg can show the success of their program if they conduct an evaluation or assessment. Finally, Wartburg will gain an understanding of any aspects of the program that may need to be changed or adopted as a result of assessment and evaluation.
**Recommendation for Further Research**

Research is needed that compares students who have gone through Wilderness Orientation Programs to students who have participated in traditional orientation programs. One way in which this could be completed is through a four-year study that assesses retention rates and compares student development between the two groups. Surveys or questionnaires could address questions related to the purposes and goals of orientation programs. A focus group could address questions on student development and the students could tell how orientation programs contributed to their development. The focus group could be repeated yearly to see if the orientation programs had long-term effects on student development. Retention rates for each group could be monitored on a yearly basis and the results could be compared for each year and compared in terms of which group had the greatest number of students completing their degrees.

**Conclusion**

Wilderness Orientation Programs are becoming more popular on campuses and seem to benefit both the institutions and the students participating in them. Preliminary studies indicate that Wilderness Orientation Programs may contribute favorably to college student development and retention. However, without further research comparing Wilderness Orientation Programs to traditional orientation, there is no way to justify that Wilderness Orientation Programs should be implemented on every campus.
References


