

In Their Own Words: The Perceived Benefits of Participation in the First Ascent Wilderness Orientation Program

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Wilderness orientation programs, as a special type of orientation, have become commonplace at many colleges and universities. The First Ascent (FA) program is an example of one such program and is a small piece of a comprehensive first-year experience offered at Appalachian State University (ASU). This program evaluation is intended to uncover the meaning of First Ascent through the students' voice. Specifically, this qualitative study used naturally occurring data as an unobtrusive measure to gather feedback from participants over the eight-year period in which First Ascent has been in existence. Analysis of the data revealed that students spoke of the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of the experience as well as the importance of the natural world as the medium. Issues of personal welfare were notable but not prevalent.

The late teens and early twenties are a time when most college bound individuals experience great feelings of uncertainty as they transition from high school and life with their families to a new collegiate environment. Psychosocial theories such as Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of development examine how student growth occurs in social, emotional, physical, and intellectual domains as one searches to form an identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The first year of the college experience can be a "make or break" proposition. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "nearly half of all freshman students do not complete college and a majority of those drop out before their second year" (qtd. in Draeger, 2007). Colleges and universities have recognized this and have thus formulated ways to support students during the first-year experience (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). One common way institutions begin to support students in their transition to collegiate life is through orientation programs. As a special type of orientation, wilderness-based outdoor orientation programs have become commonplace at many colleges and universities in which traditional populations of students make up the majority of the enrollment (Bell, 2008). Some areas of the country are better suited than others with regard to access to the wilderness. With this said, several urban

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campuses have made use of city parks, playgrounds, fields, and gardens in inventing ways to engage students in the outdoors.

The First Ascent program is an example of a wilderness orientation program that takes place each year at Appalachian State University. ASU is especially well suited to offer a wilderness-based orientation program. It is nestled in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, part of the Southern Appalachian Mountain range in the southeast United States—"Scenic country roads, wilderness hiking trails, and crystal clear creeks and waterfalls afford recreational opportunities for a variety of outdoor activities twelve months of the year" (Boone North Carolina Region: Outdoor Recreation Map and Guide). The student enrollment at ASU in fall of 2009 was 16,968, of which 2,743 were first-year students (Appalachian Fast Facts).

Orientation programs such as First Ascent are intended to accomplish the goals identified by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2006), but do so through adventure and nature-based expedition models commonly derived from the Outward Bound philosophy.

Outward Bound is a non-profit educational organization that serves people of all ages and backgrounds through active learning expeditions that inspire character development, self-discovery and service both in and out of the classroom. Outward Bound delivers programs using unfamiliar settings as a way for participants across the country to experience adventure and challenge in a way that helps students realize they can do more than they thought possible. (About Outward Bound, 2009)

College students seem especially responsive to the combination of physical stress, mental challenge, group encounter, and individual awareness that the Outward Bound model is designed to promote (Medrick, 1978, p. 3). The addition of the outdoors as the medium for the experience, coupled with the adventure element, creates unique opportunities for students to enjoy success as they transition to college. This program evaluation is intended to uncover the meaning of such experiences through the student's voice and explore the question: What are students' perceptions of the First Ascent (FA) wilderness orientation program at Appalachian State University?

Review of Literature

Wilderness college orientation programs are a strategy of taking entering first-year students into an environment not necessarily typical of college (e.g., the natural world) to help them adjust to collegiate life (Gass, 1999). Many studies have been completed on outcomes of collegiate wilderness orientation programs (Bell, 2006; Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009; Galloway, 2000; Gass, 1983; Jones & Hinton, 2007). Research has shown participation in wilderness orientation programs promotes social benefits (Bell, 2006; Gass, Garvey, & Sugarman, 2003), spiritual benefits (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009), increases self-efficacy (Jones & Hinton, 2007), and helps to facilitate adjustment to collegiate life (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996).

Other studies have looked at changes occurring in the course of the first year of college (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009; Gass, 1987; Jones & Hinton, 2007). In a qualitative study investigating long-term influences of wilderness orientation programs, Gass, Garvey, and Sugerman (2003) found three emerging themes: assumptions of self and others were challenged; peer friendships were developed and had strong, positive, and lasting effects; and the orientation program positively affected their undergraduate education and their lives after graduation (p. 36). The Gass, Garvey, and Sugerman (2003) study was conducted over 17 years from when the individual(s) participated in the wilderness orientation program. While these studies demonstrate the positive (and lasting) effects of participation and challenges to wilderness orientation programs over time, there are few studies that have looked at a thick description of the students' voice or perspective of their immediate reaction to such experiences.

Astin's (1993) work on what matters to students in college proposed that student peer groups are the most pervasive influence on student growth and development. Barefoot, from the Policy Center on the First Year of College (2000), reinforced this notion and asserted that research-based objectives for the first-year experience are vital to student success. Among these objectives are the need for programs to include opportunities for increased student-to-student interaction, faculty-to-student interaction, and student involvement and engagement. The First Ascent program is one small piece of what Barefoot advocates as a comprehensive first-year experience.

First Ascent began in the summer of 2002. The program is open to any first-year student who meets the application deadline and pays the fee associated with participation in the program. The four-day FA program was designed to create a student-led wilderness experience and "provide a challenging experience which prepares students physically, emotionally, and intellectually for the next phase of their educational journey" (First Ascent, 2009).

The goals of FA are quite ambitious. The authors have included these goals to illuminate the purpose of the program as described by the FA staff. The goals include:

- providing a challenging yet supportive experience that students can use as a reference point during their transition to college and beyond;
- developing a peer-based support network through the shared experience;
- promoting independence while fostering interdependence;
- creating meaningful relationships without the distractions of everyday environment;
- reducing fear or anxiety associated with university faculty or staff interactions;
- introducing students to the unique and abundant natural resources surrounding Boone and to the opportunities available for curricular and co-curricular involvement;
- welcoming students to the Appalachian family;
- influencing or solidifying the decision to attend ASU;

- reducing the fear or anxiety associated with coming to college and “fitting in”;
- introducing students to minimum impact techniques for back country travel;
- promoting the development of a personal outdoor/environmental ethic;
- providing the opportunity for meaningful inner dialogue;
- creating an environment that is based on inclusion and the free exchange of ideas;
- providing structured and unstructured personal and group reflection of the experience;
- providing direct leadership opportunities;
- removing students from the various and sometimes invasive stimuli of our technological society; and
- introducing students to the field of outdoor adventure education and the opportunities available through ASU Outdoor Programs (D. Hutchinson, personal communication, October 10, 2009).

While it beyond the scope of this program evaluation to establish whether or not all program goals are being met, these goals, as noted above, are helpful to determining what is of importance to the program itself as defined by program staff.

The structure and content of First Ascent place emphasis upon student-to-student interaction, faculty-to-student interaction, and student involvement and engagement. As indicated previously, the four-day expedition is led by student instructors rather than by full-time student affairs staff. Staff members front-load the experience by providing regular training of student leaders on the technical skills necessary for safe and efficient back country travel, as well as group management and dynamics. ASU faculty/staff, otherwise known as “sages,” meet the group in the field for an evening meal and campfire discussion. Student participants serve as “leaders of the day” as they help the group with navigation, cooking, and camp craft. A typical schedule of the four-day experience is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

4-Day First Ascent Curriculum Format

| Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Arrival at 11 a.m. | Leaders of the Day | Leaders of the Day | Leaders of the Day |
| Introductions and Issue Gear | Navigation | Solo Experience | “Bandana” Departure Ceremony |
| Lunch & Group Initiatives | Swimming Holes | 7–8 mile Summit Hike | De-issue Gear |
| Depart for Trailhead at 4 p.m. | SAGE Visit | | What’s Next? |
| Back Country Camping | 5–6 Mile Hike | | |
| 2 Mile Hike | | | |

Methods

This qualitative program evaluation used naturally occurring data as an unobtrusive measure to gather feedback from program participants. The measures are unobtrusive because the students filled out a program evaluation (pencil and paper questionnaire) upon completion of the wilderness orientation experience as a typical requirement of the program. The researchers did not collect this data, but instead analyzed naturally occurring documents in an unobtrusive, and thus, non-reactive way (Russell & Kovacs, 2003).

In a related study, Frauman and Waryold (2009) used the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ) to capture quantitative data on students' perception of the impact of First Ascent program on life effectiveness in a pre- and post-test design. The use of unobtrusive measurement strategies is often used as a way of validating other sources of information (Russell & Kovacs, 2003). Therefore, this program evaluation was designed to enrich the findings in the previous study and to give life to the voices of the students recorded in the archival data.

This program evaluation examined feedback derived from written program evaluations from the years 2002 (the inception of the program) through 2009. Completed questionnaires were entered verbatim into a typewritten summary of responses (by question) by a graduate assistant. A spot check from questionnaires from each year was conducted to ensure accuracy.

In the eight years that this program has existed, approximately 410 students have participated in this wilderness orientation experience (personal communication, D. Hutchinson & C. Rivers, October 14, 2009). The questionnaires contained 12 evaluative, open-ended questions. Some of the questions were specific to trip logistics (e.g., trip progression, a rating of the trip on a scale from 1 to 10, equipment, food, and marketing), while other questions were directed towards eliciting information pertaining to student perceptions about the experience.

Analyses of the student responses to the following questions were conducted:

- What will you remember most about this trip?
- What did you learn about yourself on this trip?
- Did you feel challenged (please comment on both physical and mental challenges)?
- What element of the trip was most meaningful to you?

After the initial analysis, additional logistical questions were explored to help explain the category themes. Those questions included:

- What if anything would you change about the trip?
- Would you highly recommend this experience to future incoming freshmen?
- How did you find out about this trip?

Also, interviews were conducted with individuals, the current director, and the founder of the program as a means to clarify program content and goals and to gather historical information.

A content analysis of the program evaluations was conducted using a word

and phrase frequency counter. The word frequency counter reads text files and produces an alphabetical output which includes a list of words and the frequency of occurrence (e.g., people, 84). The phrase frequency counter reads text files and produces an alphabetical output of a string of words (e.g., new friends, 66). From this list, the authors identified themes based upon what was perceived as symbolic of the content. The authors compared the themes to establish intercoder reliability (Neuendorf, 2002). As recommended by Krippendorff (1980), these themes were checked by representative interpreters (sometimes referred to as a panel of experts) to enhance the trustworthiness of data.

Results

An analysis of the written program evaluations from eight years of archival data yielded interesting results. First, the authors noticed a strong consistency of feedback offered by program participants throughout the years. Although the written evaluations were based upon a set of prescribed questions determined by FA staff, the questions were open-ended, and the answers were free flowing and representative of student voice. After analyzing the FA program evaluations, several prominent themes emerged, including:

- interpersonal aspect of the experience—interactions with others and group members, telling stories, making new friends;
- intrapersonal aspect of the experience—reflection on one's own abilities, mental and physical accomplishments, opportunities for self-reflection (e.g., "solo," an intentional exercise in which participants are asked to spend time alone outdoors for a given length of time);
- importance placed upon the natural world—awe inspiring natural areas visited throughout the trip; and
- issues of personal welfare—attention to comfort and personal needs of the participant.

Interpersonal Theme

The "interpersonal aspects of the experience" emerged as the most prominent theme throughout the data. Words such as "people," "friends," "group," "together," "connections," and "bonding" establish this theme. Of the many quotes, the following best represent the students' voice when asked what was most meaningful: "Getting to know the people and bonding as much as we did, even though we only knew each other for three days..." Additionally, throughout the data, the students appeared to be surprised and pleased by their ability to get along. This theme is reflective of the pervasive influence of peer-to-peer relationships as established in the literature.

In addition, there was a lack of any mention of negative group dynamics. The authors attributed this to the intentionality of the FA program format, the facilitation skills of the student leaders, the program length, and the leveling effect

of the outdoors as the medium. Over an eight-year period, the culture of these groups (and thus, the perceived experience) has been recorded as consistently positive. The participants commented extensively on the mental and physical challenges associated with backpacking and outdoor pursuits—"I learned that I am stronger, mentally and physically, than I thought I was."

Intrapersonal Theme

A surprise to the investigators was the students' frequent reference to the solo experience in response to the questions, "What element of the experience was most meaningful to you?" "What will you remember most about this trip?" and, "What did you learn about yourself from this trip?" Comments included: "Meeting new people," "the solo," and "proving to myself that I was capable." From this observation, the authors found the intrapersonal aspect of the experience, the solo experience, and other opportunities provided for self reflection were most meaningful.

Word frequency analysis of student responses revealed terms such as "solo," "reflection time," "push," and phrases such as "I can," "can push myself," "can do anything," "capable of," "put my mind," and "stronger than I" to establish this theme. These phrases imply that students seemed surprised and pleased by their accomplishments.

Natural World

The next theme that emerged was the importance placed upon the natural world. Words such as "waterfall," "awesome," "view," "mountains," and "river" were commonly used to describe memorable moments for the students in the outdoors. One student remarked that "the waterfalls and swimming holes and awesome view at the end" were most memorable. Recreational activities (e.g., swimming, hiking, backpacking, solo, and campfire) were also notable.

One distinct advantage of this type of orientation experience is the use of the natural world as the medium for student growth and success. Mental and physical stimulation occurs as students traverse the trails and changing inclines. Students were asked to abide by the expectations of the program by leaving items such as watches, cell phones, and iPods at home to be free of everyday distractions. The role of the natural world coupled with program expectations enhanced opportunities for introspection.

Personal welfare

The final theme is "issues of personal welfare." Contrasting views, such as "I hate walking" and "I stink after four days," were mentioned as detractors from the experience. The authors hesitated to categorize this as a theme since the frequency of these types of issues was negligible. Nonetheless, these contrasting comments

can be used in improving future programs. For example, phrases such as “amount of miles walked,” “the amount of rain,” “tents instead of tarps,” “[provide] more fruits and veggies,” appeared to detract from the experience for some members. Many of these comments were countered with supportive responses such as, “I need more explanation on how to deal with feminine hygiene,” “I can be patient when it comes to food,” and “I can live in the same shirt for three days and deal with the smell.”

When reflecting the text of the verbatim comments, the authors noted that some students wished that they were “in better shape.” For example, one student commented, “[The wilderness experience] was a little long for me, but that could be because I’m out of shape.” This remark can be directly traced to comments made about mileage and the difficulty of the backpacking activity. Several students commented on the need to add fresh (non-packaged) foods, and others spoke to the importance of having a mixed-gender leadership team. Comments that reflected this theme included, “[Provide] one boy and one girl instructor so the ‘fem talk’ won’t be awkward” and “As much as I loved both of the instructors, I wish there was one boy and one girl on every trip.”

Although the goals of FA are not written as learning outcomes, certain programmatic goals are reflected in the students’ voices. FA appears to provide a challenging yet supportive experience. A peer-based support network is created through a shared, challenging outdoor experience, and meaningful relationships without the distractions of everyday life are formed. For some students, new and unique experiences in the outdoors are realized. Fear and anxiety associated with coming to college and “fitting in” are reduced. The importance of personal and group reflection is emphasized. Leadership opportunities are built into the design and structure of the experience. The analyses of the program evaluations were consistently positive. Thus, at face value, it can be concluded that FA staff is attentive to most program goals.

Limitations of the Program Evaluation

Several limitations to this program evaluation must be noted. First, this qualitative study used naturally occurring data as an unobtrusive measure to gather feedback from program participants. Program evaluations are a type of self-reported data. Student respondents may have answered the questions according to what they believe the First Ascent staff wanted/expected to hear. Second, although this program evaluation was conducted with the entire population of students who have participated in First Ascent over eight years, this population is not necessarily representative of ASU. The demographics of the population are unknown. Anecdotal comments generated from interviews with program staff indicate that the population is typically composed of traditional-aged first-year students (18 or 19 years of age) and the gender make-up is balanced. Also, participants’ previous experience with the outdoors is unknown and is likely to be a moderating factor. Since students pay a fee to participate in the First Ascent program, only participants who can afford the fee will likely

participate. This may create a homogenous population by socio-economic status, which could skew the outcomes.

A marketing question asked participants, "How did you find out about the trip?" Although this question yielded helpful information about discovering this opportunity through Web materials (the FA Web site as well as the ASU Admissions Web site, "First Connections"), parents, friend's referral, and other sources, it would be beneficial to learn more about why students chose to participate. For example, did parents make them aware of this opportunity or "sign them up" for the experience? This information could shape the perceptions of the participants and their experience.

Making meaning of how persons or groups perceive their experiences through a content analysis process cannot and should not be generalized to the larger population. The purpose of this evaluation was simply to capture the students' voices at a single institution. Practitioners in the field may find this information useful as they search for descriptions of best practice type programs. It should be noted, however, that readers should examine the findings with caution as what might be considered a best practice on one campus, may not be appropriate for another.

Implications and recommendations

Wilderness orientation programs offer students a unique opportunity to orient to the collegiate setting. In a study by Frauman and Waryold (2009), three groups of students were studied over the course of a semester using the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ) (Neill, Marsh, & Richards, 2003). As compared to the control group, the two groups of students who participated in the wilderness-oriented programs had greater scores on six of the eight LEQ dimensions (e.g., time management, emotional control), as well as a greater total score than students who did not participate at both the beginning and end of their first semester of college. This study focused on the qualitative piece through the students' voice. This program evaluation revealed that student participation in a wilderness orientation program such as First Ascent can have an immediate impact in the lives of participants. Through this study, it was possible to better understand student perceptions of FA through their own words.

The potential impact of programs like First Ascent should not be overlooked. Although First Ascent is a short term program, it offers students opportunities to become familiar with ASU and serves as gateway into collegiate life. First impressions as expressed through student perceptions can have a dramatic impact on the transition to college.

With the call for accountability in the academy and limited resources, colleges and universities are being asked to assess program outcomes to demonstrate their worth. The staff of First Ascent would be well advised to formulate measurable student learning outcomes from ideas conceptualized in their goals. This would enable First Ascent to demonstrate the specific outcomes that are important to student growth and development and connect these outcomes to program content.

Although it is difficult to control for variables that might influence persistence into the second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), research should be conducted on how student learning outcomes from wilderness orientation programs such as First Ascent transfer into the everyday life of participants. Careful attention should be directed towards the developmental and demographic profiles of the student population (CAS, 2006, p. 268). As student demographics across the country become increasingly diverse, First Ascent staff would be well advised to think of ways of attracting this increasingly diverse undergraduate student body. Careful analysis of program content with student diversity in mind might motivate First Ascent to think of ways to expand their vision, modify existing program content, alter marketing techniques, and examine access issues. For example, would a single gender (e.g., an all-female experience) better meet the needs of students and result in a stronger experience for female participants? Would a scholarship program open up access for students who cannot afford to pay the fee to participate in First Ascent?

First Ascent is one piece of ASU's approach to the first-year experience. Collaboration between all offices that have a hand in orienting and assisting first-year students is recommended. A comprehensive assessment of the first-year experience and the associated programs is necessary to ascertain the overall effectiveness of the first-year experience at ASU.

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