

SEER 2008 ABSTRACT

Outdoor Orientation Program Effects: Sense of Place and Social Benefits

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More than 200 schools currently use some form of the Outward Bound-adapted model of outdoor orientation (OO). Assisting students with the transition to college is a primary goal of these programs (Bell, Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008). This study was conducted at a small Midwestern liberal-arts college with a strong environmental mission. Participation in an OO program is required of all new students. In the fall of 2006, 186 freshmen went on 19 trips. This research explores two program outcomes pertinent to the goal of assisting students in their transition to college. First, it explores the degree to which the Outdoor Orientation (OO) program fosters *sense of place* among new students. Second, it explores the *social benefits* of participation in OO programs.

Review of Literature

Documented gains associated with Outdoor Orientation (OO) programs include personal growth (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996), an increase in self-efficacy (Hinton, Twilley, & Mittelstaedt, 2007), and improved retention (Gass, 1990). Outdoor orientation programs have also had a positive effect on participants' social skills, such as developing social networks (Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003) adjustment, small group skills, and reducing stereotyping (Galloway, 2000). One area that remains unexplored is the effectiveness of these programs in fostering a *sense of place* among students. *Sense of place* is defined as “an experientially

based intimacy with the natural process, community, and history of one's place" (Sanger, 1997, p. 2). *Sense of place* incorporates dependence, identity, awareness, and attachment (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001).

Methods

The pre-/posttest questionnaire consisted of 32 questions central to *sense of place*, *social benefits*, and other trip-specific questions. The questionnaire's items were created after reviewing the previous literature. Most questions pertained to student attitudes and were measured using a 5-point Likert scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Students were also asked to report recent and anticipated social behaviors, using a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "often." The survey was administered during the orientation check-in process and again at the end of each trip while participants were transported back to campus. A total of 118 students completed both surveys for a matched-pairs response rate of 63%. Reliability and factor analyses were conducted to examine the psychometric properties of the two categories designed to measure *sense of place* and *social benefits*. Paired-samples *t*-tests were used to determine if changes occurred from pre- to posttrip levels. Replies to open-ended survey questions were analyzed and coded according to themes and concepts that emerged from the data. In an attempt to control for "postgroup euphoria" (Marsh, 1986), nine semistructured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of upper-class students. Interviews further explored students' experiences and impressions of past OO involvement.

Results

A comparison of pretest and posttest responses revealed significant differences in the number of friendships participants reported having on campus, $t_{91} = -15.15$, $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). The average number of friends increased from 2.2 ($SD = 3.81$) to 12.8 ($SD = 8.01$). OO participants also reported a significant increase in the number of people on campus they would trust with an emotional secret, $t_{82} = -7.32$, $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed), increasing on average from 0.6 ($SD = 1.12$) to 4.8 ($SD = 5.49$).

Factor analysis and reliabilities information were used to group the 10 *sense of place* items into three themes: "knowing" the region (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$); "attachment" to the region ($\alpha = 0.82$); and "concern" for the region ($\alpha = 0.79$). The *social benefits* factor analysis and reliabilities results indicated four themes: "personal comfort" ($\alpha = 0.72$); "motivation to try new things with others" ($\alpha = 0.81$); exposure to "cross-cultural" ideas ($\alpha = 0.81$); and confidence with *unfamiliar* settings" ($\alpha = 0.39$). As Table 1 shows, all three *sense of place* components related to the region—"knowing," "attachment," and "concern"—were found to significantly

Table 1
Matched-pairs means comparison of sense of place and social benefits components

Component	Pre-trip		Post-trip		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
"Knowing" ¹	2.46	0.87	3.09	0.60	9.11***
"Attachment" ¹	2.42	0.76	2.78	0.77	5.51***
"Concern" ¹	2.76	0.69	2.88	0.78	2.21*
"Personal comfort" ¹	2.84	0.51	3.12	0.58	6.07***
"With others" ²	2.77	0.35	2.77	0.31	0.69
"Cross-cultural" ²	2.51	0.53	2.66	0.45	-3.34***
"Unfamiliar" ²	2.07	0.42	2.24	0.48	-4.27***

Note. 1: 0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neither Disagree or Agree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree; 2: 0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

increase following participation. All three *social benefits* components—"personal comfort," "cross-cultural," and "unfamiliar"—showed significant gains as well (see Table 1). No significant change was found in student's "exposure to *cross-cultural* ideas."

Following the OO program experience, 89% of all postsurvey respondents agreed that there are benefits to participating in the OO program, 78% reported having a discussion with someone from a different background that broadened their perspectives, and 88% agreed that they were exposed to new ideas, cultures, and backgrounds on their OO experience. A vast majority of students reported that the experience was beneficial in the following ways: social benefits (93%); new experiences or skills (22%); a reduction of fear (15.3%); benefits regarding place (13.1%); and fun (11.7%). Responses to the nine qualitative interviews also provided rich anecdotal evidence further supporting survey results. Interestingly, one of the OO program goals, help in academic transition, was not discussed as an outcome in any data.

Discussion

Program participants perceived an increase in *sense of place* and *social benefits* as a result of their orientation experience. The study supports previous *social benefits* findings and establishes *sense of place* as an important concept worthy of further investigation. This research challenges colleges and universities to consider offering OO programs as an opportunity to foster the development of community among incoming

students. It further challenges colleges and universities to maximize the potential for community development among students by offering these programs close to home. Though additional research is needed to bear out this proposition, it can be argued that there is a positive relationship between the development of *sense of place* in students and the *social benefits* that result from participation in OO programs. These gains likely interact, broadening the idea of community development to include interpersonal and place-based relationships. As one student responded, "I suppose it's just having a familiarity with the people and the place, because the people are connected to the place." Given that sense of community positively impacts retention (Jacobs & Archie, 2008), future research should explore the influence of *sense of place* and *social benefits* taken together on student retention. Additional questions for future research that emerged from this study concern the benefits of OO programs for student leaders and the impact that OO programs have on academic transition.

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