

Chapter 33

Outdoor Leadership Curricula

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One of the exciting and, at times, frustrating elements of participating in the field of outdoor adventure education and recreation involves the issue of ensuring that practicing professionals function with competence, safety, and prudence. There is no doubt that camp directors, program supervisors, and administrators need competent and qualified people in charge of their outdoor adventure programs: they all want skilled, safe, knowledgeable staff. Whether one is a parent sending a child to a camp that offers adventure-based programming, a student enrolled in a stress-challenge course or the director of a therapeutic wilderness-based program for troubled youth, there is a concern about the quality of the staff who lead such programs. Are the leaders knowledgeable and competent enough to provide a safe and enjoyable experience? Do they meet the minimum qualifications to handle such positions as adventure educator, canoe guide, ropes course instructor, or rock-climbing specialist?

The past decade has seen extraordinary growth in the use of the outdoors for educational, recreational, and human service programs. Increasing numbers of people have found the outdoors a wonderful place to arouse sensitivity, learn practical living skills, shape values, expand cognitive understanding, develop commitments, and strengthen personalities. As the demand for outdoor activities increases, there is a need for highly skilled outdoor leaders and administrators—professionals who have knowledge and skills gained from many disciplines and a variety of life experiences.

The field of outdoor adventure education is interdisciplinary in that it provides educational, recreational, and therapeutic experiences for people in dispersed recreation areas. It deals with people and the natural environment and requires knowledge, ability, and skills sufficient to operate in that environment in a safe manner with minimum impact. This field also requires understanding of and competence in group process, learning theories, leadership, program planning, administration, and a wide variety of outdoor skills.

Individual leaders and administrators of outdoor programs must understand specific characteristics of the people with whom they work, such as age group traits, socioeconomic characteristics, and developmental levels. This awareness will help in understanding behavior and developing appropriate activities and experiences. Leaders are responsible not only for designing and administering outdoor recreational programs, but also for teaching specialized outdoor recreational skills and observing the participants' interpersonal relationships.

Research in Outdoor Leadership

During the last 25 years, there have been a number of studies pertinent to outdoor leadership education. Cousineau (1977), Swiderski (1981), and Buell (1983) all identified

specific competencies deemed necessary for outdoor leaders. Each of these studies stressed that the education and preparation of competent outdoor leaders is comprised of a variety of components (e.g., experience in the field, leadership ability, skill development, and training experiences).

While several studies identify specific leadership competencies and course topics, the majority have been built from conceptual theory and have not been tested or evaluated. Shiner (1970), Mendenhall (1979), Simmons (1982), and Priest (1988) developed and recommended theoretical programs for the education and training of outdoor leaders in a higher education setting. Each of the studies strongly recommended that the programs be interdisciplinary in nature and that there be classroom as well as field experiences.

Building on the work of Green (1981), Raiola (1986) used an interdisciplinary approach to establish, test, and evaluate a curriculum for outdoor leadership education. Respondents in the study included not only experts with both higher education and field experience in outdoor recreation, but also students who were leaders-in-training. Based on the responses of panel members and students, a review of the literature, and the limitations set forth in the study, nine elements emerged as preferred curriculum content for outdoor leadership education (Figure 33.1).

Current Practice

After having reviewed the research, it is appropriate to look at what is actually happening in terms of current practice. More and more colleges and universities are offering wilderness-related courses and outdoor leadership curricula. In 1987 the National Recreation and Park Association-Society of Park and Recreation Educators curriculum catalog listed 17 colleges and universities which indicated the inclusion of outdoor leadership related courses or degree programs in their curriculum. The same catalog in 1997 listed 41 programs, an increase of 141 percent.

Sugerman (1997) looked at 15 colleges and universities in the United States that offered four-year academic degree programs in outdoor leadership. A review of these programs revealed interesting information. There did not seem to be a typical school at which programs were offered; degree programs occurred in both large universities and in small schools and in both public and private institutions.

There was no agreement as to what to call these degree programs, as the titles differed tremendously from school to school. Titles included Wilderness Leadership, Outdoor Leadership, Outdoor Leadership and Instruction, Experiential Education, Adventure Education, Outdoor Education, Outdoor Adventure Education, Outdoor Recreation and Adventure Recreation.

The department in which the degree programs were housed varied greatly between schools, and tended to im-

pact the courses within the program. Out of the 15 schools, 9 (60 percent) were located in health, physical education and recreation (HPER); recreation management; or leisure studies departments. Two programs were located in kinesiology or exercise science, one in environmental sciences, and three in outdoor or adventure education or leadership.

Required coursework within degree programs also varied. Some schools tended to require courses strictly related to outdoor leadership such as technical skills, group process, leadership, and administration. Other schools stressed coursework in the natural sciences and education. Programs within HPER departments tended to have community-based recreation courses required as well as outdoor leadership courses. Sugerman calculated the percentage of credits in each curriculum that were specifically outdoor leadership-focused and found a range from 22.2 percent to 86.8 percent.

There is much variation in the current degree programs which is based on the mission and goals of the program, the influence of the department in which the program is housed and the philosophy of the college or university in which the program is located. The following describes four selected programs that are representative of the variety and focus of current curricula.

The outdoor recreation option at Eastern Washington University is one of three options in the recreation and leisure services department including therapeutic recreation and recreation management. The outdoor recreation option is geared to train students in outdoor leadership and resource management to eventually work for public and private organizations including government and commercial agencies. Students in the option are required to take a core of recreation courses required of all majors in the department and in addition must take technical skills courses in backpacking, canoeing, whitewater rafting, and search and rescue along with wilderness second-aid and outdoor leadership.

The outdoor education program at the University of New Hampshire is located within the Department of Kinesiology. The option is one of five in the department including exercise science, physical education pedagogy, athletic training and sports studies. Students are trained in the management and educational and/or therapeutic uses of physical activity in the natural environment. These goals are achieved by having students complete coursework in technical skills, wilderness emergency medicine, outdoor leadership, theory of outdoor education, administration, and field-based experiences. In addition, students develop a specialized area focusing on a current professional application in outdoor education. Areas in which students specialize tend to occur in education, business, therapy, therapeutic recreation, or management. Students are also required to document a minimum of 100 days of "face-to-face" outdoor leadership experiences before completing an academic internship.

Figure 33.1 Content of Outdoor Leadership Curriculum

Based on the consensus of objectives, the review of the literature, and the limitations set forth, the following nine elements emerged as preferred content of the outdoor leadership curriculum.

1. *Leadership style*: This element of the curriculum identifies topics, information, and practices that will enhance the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the student to develop his or her own leadership style. Topics:
 - a. General knowledge related to leadership styles.
 - b. Characteristics of the leader.
 - c. Responsibilities of the wilderness leader.
2. *Judgment/objective-subjective*: This element serves to identify topics, information, and practices that will help students to develop their own judgment and decision-making ability for outdoor leadership. Topics:
 - a. Characteristics of sound judgment.
 - b. Potential problems of poor judgment.
 - c. Process for learning sound judgment.
3. *Trip planning and organization*: This element identifies topics, information, and practices that will help students to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities in program planning, organization, and evaluation for outdoor leadership. Topics:
 - a. Common elements of program planning.
 - b. Considerations of activity and site selection.
 - c. Evaluation tools for outdoor programs.
 - d. Common elements of successful wilderness programs.
4. *Environmental issues*: This element identifies topics, information, and practices that will enhance the student's skills and abilities in minimum-impact practice and environmental considerations that affect wilderness programs. Topics:
 - a. Philosophy of minimum-impact practice.
 - b. Common problems of overuse.
 - c. Minimum-impact practice and procedures.
 - d. Common hazards in wilderness trips.
 - e. Procedures and practice to minimize hazards.
5. *Risk management*: This element identifies information and practices that will enable students to become aware of the safety and legal issues associated with outdoor leadership, and to develop emergency plans and procedures. Topics:
 - a. Common risks in outdoor programming.
 - b. Steps in risk management for outdoor programming.
 - c. Legal liability and standard of care.
 - d. Release forms and acknowledgment of participation.
 - e. Emergency policies and procedures.
6. *Instructional principles*: This element identifies information and practices that will enhance the knowledge and abilities of students to teach and present material in an outdoor setting. Topics:
 - a. Introduction to learning styles.
 - b. Elements of experiential education.
 - c. Opportunities and limitations on instruction in an outdoor setting.
 - d. Teaching techniques for wilderness programming.
7. *Navigation*: This element identifies information and practices that will help students to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities in map and compass use for outdoor leadership. Topics:
 - a. Topographic map symbols and uses.
 - b. Compass use.
 - c. Use of map and compass.
 - d. Planning routes.
8. *Group dynamics*: This element identifies topics, information, and practices that will help students enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with small groups in outdoor settings. Topics:
 - a. Techniques for communication and problem solving.
 - b. Common interpersonal issues associated with wilderness programs.
 - c. Opportunities and limitations of problem solving with small groups in an outdoor setting.
9. *Nutrition*: This element identifies information and practices that will help students to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities related to menu planning and preparation for outdoor programming. Topics:
 - a. Components of a balanced diet.
 - b. Practical nutrition for wilderness leaders.
 - c. Organizing, planning, and preparation of food for outdoor programming.
 - d. Techniques for food preparation in the field.

Warren Wilson College, located in Asheville, North Carolina, offers a degree in outdoor leadership studies. The degree, which is housed in the outdoor leadership department, is designed to prepare students for a leadership role in the professional field of outdoor adventure education. Students focus on facilitation and experiential education methodologies while taking courses in technical skills such as backpacking, canoeing, rock climbing, and group initiatives, interpersonal and leadership skills, and program

planning and administration. In addition, students take supporting coursework from a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, biology, and education. Students are encouraged to take other supporting coursework based on their career interests and needs. Experiential fieldwork includes a supervised practicum and an internship. Students may also work in conjunction with North Carolina Outward Bound to complete an intensive instructor development curriculum.

Northland College is located in Ashland, Wisconsin, and offers a degree in adventure education within the outdoor education department. The emphasis of the program is to prepare students for instructional positions with public and private adventure agencies. Through the curriculum, students develop a broad range of experiential teaching strategies and a strong background in safety management, environmental ethics, and technical and interpersonal skills. Students take a variety of coursework including technical skills, group process, teaching techniques, recreation leadership, and practicum experience. In addition, students are encouraged to develop a minor to enhance their professional development. Choices for minors include environmental education, Native American studies, earth science, biology or business. Students have the opportunity to take courses in blocks, which offer a more intensive, experiential program.

Sugerman concluded from her study that a more in-depth look at higher education curricula would be an important step in defining what constitutes excellence in outdoor leadership training and education.

Striking a Balance

When considering the components of outdoor leadership development, it is helpful to distinguish between “training” and “education.” Such a distinction illuminates the necessary interplay of skill mastery, in the technical sense and the evolution of a larger context of knowledge with which to practice skills. If one thinks of training as the learning of techniques, whether of fire making, rope handling, or map and compass navigation, one can view education as the process through which the student comes to understand the appropriate use of technique, as well as the implications of such use.

Through this framework, the need for a balance of training and education in the preparation of outdoor leaders becomes self-evident. One also may become aware that the development of a good leader, much like that of a good writer, psychologist, or teacher, is an ongoing process.

In the pilot and ongoing testing and evaluation of the curriculum for outdoor leadership (Raiola, 1986, 1996), some of the stages of this ongoing process become evident (Figure 33.2). At the beginning of the course, the students were at a level of “unconscious incom-

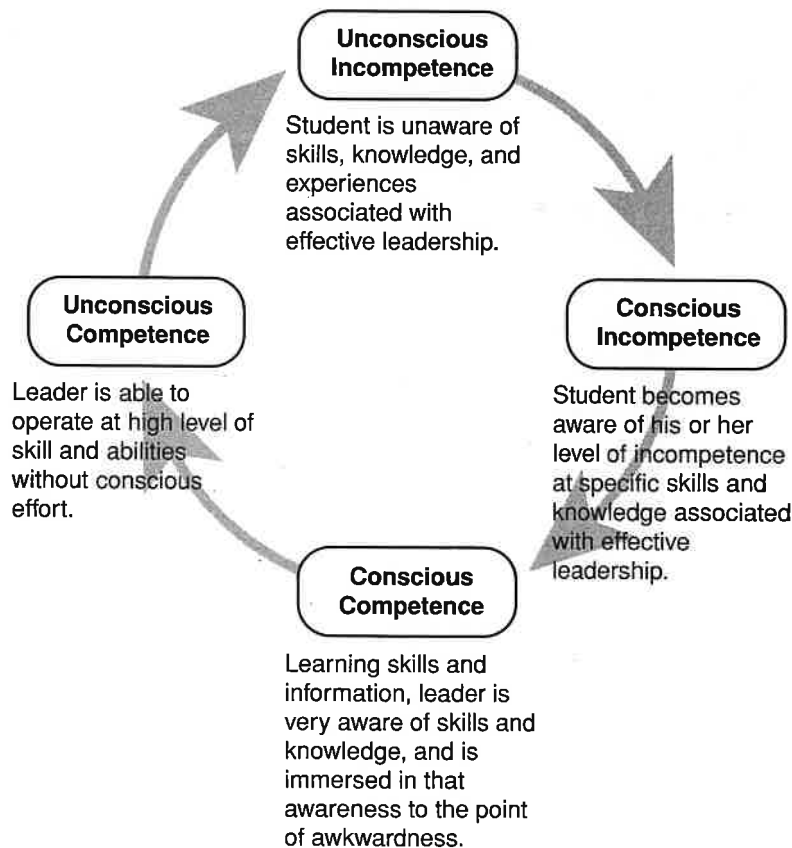
petence” relative to their skills and understanding. That is, they were largely unaware of the aspects of capable leadership and were unable to demonstrate these aspects. As they were introduced to the curriculum objectives, they progressed into a level of “conscious incompetence,” where the components of effective leadership became known to them, as did their lack of skill and experience.

Over time, the students moved into a state of “conscious competence.” With deliberate attention, they were now able to perform competently the tasks of outdoor leadership, yet the degree of self-scrutiny required to do so led to awkwardness. Often, each step of a procedure had to be thought through in order to achieve the desired result.

By the end of the course of instruction, most of the students had arrived at a level of “unconscious competence” relative to most of the curriculum objectives. They had integrated the educational and training experiences to the extent that they could perform their duties competently without constant thought. Their automatic responses had become reliable, and the groundwork for future refinements of their expertise was in place.

Each of these leaders that moves out into new situations and is required to encompass new learning, will pass

Figure 33.2 Outdoor Leadership Development Cycle



SOURCE: Raiola, 1990, p. 237. Reprinted with permission of Venture Publishing, Inc.

through the four stages illustrated in Figure 33.2. This developmental movement, though broadly defined, is subjective in nature and individual to each person; some students move through this process much faster than others.

This process, in terms of leadership development, is generally the same for each person and is a continuing, lifelong evolution as one grows and absorbs new knowledge. Optimally, an outdoor recreation curriculum will provide students with both the fundamental skills and knowledge for beginning their maturation in this field of endeavor, and a sense of themselves as representatives and teachers of the values and ethics of the outdoors.

The education and training of competent and sensitive outdoor leaders and educators have some important social and political implications for the use of and general attitudes toward the natural environment, and thus, the minimization of environmental degradation through use. Highly skilled and aware outdoor leaders are a major resource for the reeducation of the increasing numbers of people who are discovering the outdoors. By creating outdoor experiences that embody values of preservation and conservation of nature and promoting, through role modeling, a nonabusive relationship with one's environment, an outdoor leader has a unique opportunity to shape the practices and attitudes of the public.

In terms of choosing which curriculum objectives should be included in a model outdoor leadership curriculum, the studies cited earlier offer specific recommendations for content as well as sequencing. It is our view that the application of specific curriculum content should be chosen by individual outdoor recreation educators. For example, the nine elements that emerged as preferred content of the outdoor leadership education curriculum should be considered as guidelines for a college-level outdoor leadership course. The objectives are not listed in a sequence that reflects a recommended preference for presentation. Rather, they are listed as a guide for the outdoor recreation educator. It is important to note that organizing curriculum objectives around the common threads of *concepts, values, and skills and abilities* related to outdoor leadership will help to provide continuity, sequence, and integration in order to reinforce each aspect and produce a cumulative learning effect. The interplay of these organizing principles is considered by us to be critical to the success of any curriculum.

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