

Chapter 34

Accreditation and Certification: Questions for an Advancing Profession

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As professions mature and evolve, several mechanisms of operation often develop. Some of these mechanisms include establishing and maintaining integrity through identified codes of conduct, the demonstration of competence by passing certain standards, the assumption of responsibility for the profession as a whole, and some method of sanctioning by the professional community (e.g., Kultgen, 1988). With the emergence of adventure programming as a profession, questions on how the field might deal with such issues have often become the center of debate. No longer have such questions revolved around whether or not these efforts should be done, but how they might be best accomplished (e.g., Bassin et al., 1992).

Probably the two best expressions of such efforts have come in the form of certifying individual professions as competent and accrediting the programming practices of competent adventure programs. While this chapter centers on examining this evolutionary process in and from a North American perspective, you need to be aware that exhaustive dialogues concerning evolving professionalism, certification, and accreditation are currently in the forefront of thinking around the world, most notably in Australia, Great Britain, and New Zealand (e.g., Priest and Gass, 1997a).

Factors and Indicators Influencing the Professionalism of Adventure Programming in the United States

Adventure programming in North America has undergone many dramatic and rapid changes over the past 35 years. Priest and Gass (1997a) have identified some of the indicators of this growth to be:

- increasing numbers of adventure programs;
- expanding applications of adventure programs for specific populations;
- greater public acceptance of adventure programming as a valid profession;
- increase in the number of adventure programming organizations;
- increase in artificially constructed adventure environments for programming; and
- increase in the level of research and program evaluation.

What has been interesting to observe with this growth in adventure programming are several related factors that have a direct bearing on the future growth, acceptance, and possibly even the continuance of the field. Some of these factors include:

- an increasingly litigious society;
- a better educated insurance industry;
- limited access to insurance coverage (e.g., in the spring of 1997 Markel Insurance Company—the second largest provider of insurance for adventure programs in the United States—decided not to renew insurance policies of stand-alone ropes/adventure courses);
- increasing government regulation concerning access and use of natural resources (e.g., Joshua Tree National Park and Red Rock Canyon Conservation Area);
- decreasing levels of federal, state, and local funding to support the sustenance and protection of natural environments;
- establishment of or an increase in fees to use wilderness areas;
- increasing levels of technological advances and their influences on programming as well as client expectations (e.g., cell phones, global positioning systems, more advanced extrication systems used in rescues); and
- the development of external “watchdog” groups (e.g., Michelle Sutton Memorial Fund Inc., which addresses inappropriate practices of wilderness therapy camps).

Methods of Verifying Professionalism: Certification and Accreditation

To address such developments, a number of strategies have emerged in the adventure programming industry. Probably the first to be considered was the certification of individual leaders. Certification can be defined as a process guaranteeing that certain minimum standards of competency have been met or exceeded by a professional as evaluated by a certifying agency (Senosk, 1977). The idea of certifying adventure professionals was to provide a “means to [ensure] that only qualified people may systematically engage in the formal teaching and/or leading of individuals in the outdoor adventure situation” (Ewert, 1985, p. 17).

A movement to certify individual instructors began in the late 1970s in the United States. Led by Paul Petzoldt and some colleges and universities that offered adventure programming, dialogue in the late 1970s was followed by the formation of the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) outdoor leader certification program in 1980. WEA enjoyed initial advances as being an accepted form of verifying leaders with appropriate judgment to deliver safe and quality wilderness programming. However, its influence on the field has faded and as an organization it is currently experiencing a downturn in operations.

Why has such an effort failed to prosper at this time? It certainly was not due to monetary support or professional effort. Some of the best minds in the North American adventure programming field focused much of their professional careers and talents on trying to see this effort or similar ones succeed for more than 15 years. At least at the current time, the certification of outdoor adventure leaders has not evolved as an effective answer to the problems facing adventure programming for a number of reasons.

One problem was the ability to adequately identify and assess the so-called *soft* and *meta* skills; the “people-oriented” elements such as instruction, facilitation, and communication skills of leadership (Priest and Gass, 1997a). These elements of outdoor leadership are much more difficult to train and assess than technically oriented *hard* skills such as activity, safety, and environmental skills. Note that there are several other certification schemes in North America that currently are experiencing stronger degrees of success (e.g., American Mountain Guides Association [AMGA], Wilderness First Responder [WFR] trainings), but these programs center primarily on certifying specific associated technical skills, and not the soft or meta skills of outdoor leadership.

The idea that certification was the “answer” to client safety or environmental protection was also critically flawed. Consider a most capable outdoor leader with excellent judgment working in a program with old equipment, outdated educational philosophies, unethical client treatment, and a large group travelling through a dangerous and very fragile area. Whether this leader is certified won’t make any difference in avoiding accidents or preventing damage to nature for this substandard program (Priest and Gass, 1997b).

In many ways, certification also failed because it was unable to examine adventure programming in a true systemic manner. Geographical diversity (e.g., different environments) and programming differences (e.g., varying client groups, differing program lengths) made the development of one set of standards for all programming formats often impossible.

While certification was being considered, another form of professional assessment was also developing. Evolving out of a number of sources with their roots in the Outward Bound system (e.g., Wade, 1983; Wade and Fischesser, 1988) as well as through several documents produced by the Association for Experiential Education (Johanson, 1984, 1985, 1987; Priest and Dixon, 1990), program accreditation was formalized in the early 1990s as a method for programs to provide greater benefits for their organizations and clients. Some of the targeted benefits for accrediting programs include:

- achieving appropriate standards of professional care without programs losing the flexibility to decide how standards can be met;

- stimulating an internal learning process within the organization to enhance risk management and program quality efforts;
- receiving an external and objective perspective on program operations and risk management;
- providing program participants with a level of quality assurance;
- providing a marketing tool for attracting clients;
- providing external regulating agencies (e.g., federal and state governments) with a level of quality assurance;
- receiving access to natural resources and programming areas where external agencies require accreditation for entrance;
- providing insurance providers with a level of quality assurance;
- receiving discounts on insurance premiums; and
- becoming associated with programs that have made a commitment to hold themselves out to the greater community as possessing standards valued by the field.

Accreditation retains the strengths of individual certification without being bound by some of its weaknesses. For example, accreditation (1) provides adventure programs with the ability to achieve standards without losing the flexibility to decide and design how these standards are met; (2) takes a "systemic view" of the process of adventure programming rather than dividing it into individualized categories; (3) encourages improvement through internal and external review; (4) assures clients, agencies, and the custodians of the lands that a program has clearly defined and appropriate objectives, and (5) maintains conditions under which their achievement can be reasonably met.

Two studies assessing the professional opinions of certification and accreditation have been conducted in the United States and their findings seem to be consistent with the trends highlighted here. In one study surveying professional opinions of certification and accreditation process of adventure leaders, Bassin et al. (1992) found that 62 percent favored program accreditation over individual certification (38 percent). These researchers also found that those individuals who commented on their preference of program accreditation over individual certification "felt that accreditation was the only viable alternative to certification because more professional credibility would be gained and there would be less dependence on the unpredictable human part of the equation (of leading adventure experiences)" (p. 25). This was similar to results found in a study by Cockrell and Detzel (1985) where 70 percent of professionals surveyed supported the idea of program accreditation over individual certification.

The Association for Experiential Education Accreditation Process

The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) Accreditation Process possesses four phases—the initial application, self-assessment phase, on-site evaluation phase, and formal accreditation and continuation of accreditation phase. Within each of these phases are 17 sequential steps prospective programs follow on their way to becoming accredited. These steps include (van der Smissen and Liddle, 1997):

Phase I—Initial Application

- Step 1: Organization contacts the AEE Staff Accreditation Administrator.
- Step 2: AEE provides materials: Cover Letter, Fact Sheet, Preliminary Application, and Organization Profile Form.
- Step 3: Organization completes Preliminary Application and Organization Profile, pays preliminary application fee, and receives current *Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure Programs*, *Self-Assessment Workbook* on disk, and *Policy and Procedures Manual*.
- Step 4: Organization attends Accreditation Workshop (registration included in the fee paid in Step 3; this fee does not include food and lodging for the workshop).

Phase II—Self-Assessment

- Step 5: Organization undertakes self-assessment process.
- Step 6: Organization submits self-assessment report with formal application and fee within 18 months of processing the Preliminary Application (Step 3).
- Step 7: Liaison Accreditation Council members and AEE Staff Accreditation Administrator review report, in general, for completeness.

Phase III—Evaluation

- Step 8: Accreditation Council with Organization forms on-site review team, and establishes time schedule.

- Step 9: Team conducts on-site review and reports findings to Accreditation Council.
- Step 10: Accreditation Council liaisons review the findings of the on-site review team.
- Step 11: Accreditation Council sends the report to the Organization for response.
- Step 12: Organization submits a response to Council.

Phase IV—Formal Accreditation and Continuation of Accreditation

- Step 13: Accreditation Council (entire) reviews the Organization response.
- Step 14: Accreditation Council formally acts (see types of action).
- Step 15: Organization evaluates the process.
- Step 16: Organization submits annual status report and pays annual fee.
- Step 17: Organization applies to Accreditation Council for renewal of accreditation.

The accreditation manual (Williamson and Gass, 1993, 1995) is designed in a sequential fashion, focusing on both the technical aspects of adventure experiences as well as the teaching and ethical practices used by programs. Chapter one addresses philosophical, educational, and ethical concerns, focusing on program management and operations, ethical considerations, environmental concerns, and universal access considerations. Chapter two addresses risk management, including guidelines on safety policies; risk management plans; communications protocols; search, rescue, emergency aid, and evacuation procedures; staff: participant ratios; safety reviews; and written procedures. Chapter three addresses staff qualifications, covering areas concerning hiring, qualifications, skills and training, and conduct. Chapter four addresses transportation, concentrating on ground, water, and air transportation methods.

Chapter five addresses land technical skills, covering areas concerning hiking, running, initiative games, high- and low-ropes-challenge courses, orienteering, bike touring, mountain biking, bouldering, artificial wall climbing, top rope and lead rock climbing, rappelling, caving, river crossing activities, snow shoeing, ice climbing, mountain snow and glacier travel, cross-country and backcountry skiing, mountaineering, and solos. Chapter six addresses water technical skills, directing attention to personal flotation devices, flat water canoeing and kayaking, whitewater canoeing and kayaking, river rafting, ocean kayaking, sailing, snorkeling and scuba diving. Chapter seven addresses air technical skills, concentrating on parapente, hang glid-

ing, and parachuting. Chapter eight addresses environmental, emergency, and cultural skills, targeting concerns with service projects, camping, remote travel, expeditions, international considerations, and emergency response training. There is also a reference section that includes a report/scoring card and bibliography.

All of the sections within each chapter are designed in a sequential fashion, with each standard presented in a "general" structure followed by more specific details. A lettering system exists in each section and is structured in the following manner:

- A. General—provides for any overview of items not covered under the other letters.
- B. Environmental Understanding—examines a program's knowledge of the areas of operations as they relate to risk management and appropriateness of activities. "Environments" include wild and natural areas, towns and cities, and constructions—such as ropes courses and artificial climbing walls.
- C. Human Understanding—examines a program's knowledge of participants' abilities, health, and readiness for the activities.
- D. Conducting the Activity—examines how the program presents and operates each activity.
- E. Emergency Procedures—examines the program's preparedness to respond to accidents, which can include damage to property, illness, injury, fatality, lost persons, and near misses.
- F. Clothing and Equipment—examines a program's understanding of the appropriate clothing and equipment for activities, including maintenance, repair, replacement, and how to improvise if necessary.
- G. Nourishment—examines a program's understanding of how to provide for adequate food and water requirements for given activities and environments.

Some standards include an explanation to help interpret the desired intent for the personnel from the adventure program and the reviewers. The following example is from the clothing and equipment area of the section addressing high- and low-ropes-challenge courses:

13.F.01 Participants wear appropriate clothing and equipment.

Explanation: When protective gear (e.g., helmets, harnesses) is used on elements requiring it, each piece is securely and properly fastened. Proper wheelchairs are used/provided for participants needing them. If helmets are worn by people on the challenge course, then they are also worn by belayers.

One of the most important features of the accreditation process is the program self-assessment stage (Step 5). During this stage, programs are supplied with a computerized disk that leads the program through a systematic self-examination procedure on its strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of the self-assessment is to lead programs to collect, review, and record appropriate materials related to the administration of adventure-based, experiential education organizations and document concepts, policies, and actions of such programs in writing (van der Smitten and Liddle, 1997).

Conclusion

The growth of adventure programming and its increasing intersection with traditional agencies (e.g., educational institutions, government regulating bodies, therapeutic organizations) has led to standardizing certain methods of practice. This phenomenon, combined with requests for ways to verify program quality and the management of risk (e.g., from various constituents, including parents, administrators, funding agencies, other professionals, participants) has resulted in several efforts to provide a means of quality assurance. Probably the two most developed efforts replying to such a need have been efforts to certify individual professions as competent and accreditate the programming practices of competent adventure programs. Currently in North America, certification efforts seem most successful when targeted toward addressing competence in specific technical skills. Program accreditation seems better suited when addressing broader, systematic, comprehensive, and more dynamic issues in leading adventure programs.

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