

Goals & Research

The following summary of findings is from a research project conducted by Susan P. Cole using participants from the WAFFYS program. Susan was the Challenge Course Program Coordinator at UNC's Outdoor Education Center and a Master's candidate (December 2003) in the Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies at UNC Chapel Hill. The purpose of this study was to explore the social adjustment process for new students who have participated in a Wilderness Orientation Program.

The WAFFYS participants in this study came from different backgrounds of wilderness experiences. Overall, the program was beneficial and helped the students develop into who they are now on their college path. Participants stated that their gains far exceeded the students' initial expectations for participating in WAFFYS. After the data was analyzed, three common themes emerged: peer development, self-confidence, and decision-making skills.

Peer Development

The theme of peer development actually was comprised of two aspects: meeting new people and working with a new group of people. Participants all stated that wanting to meet new people was a reason for taking part in the program. Developing new friendships is often a critical goal for students. "Attachment to a positive peer group is seen as an extremely valuable step for students making the transition to University life" (Gass, 1999, p.374). Students stated that their goals for meeting new people were met and surpassed through WAFFYS. Throughout the trip students learned more about each other and realized that while they each had different interests, they now shared this common bonding experience. The common WAFFYS experience was powerful to the participants. These students experienced a stronger connection to each other through the social interactions during the trip, such as the van ride to the trailhead, hiking, and talking in camp. The following quotes illustrated how comfortable the participants felt sharing thoughts, feelings, goals, and fears about school with each other on the trip.

It was intense doing everything together, relying on each other and you had just met them. It was great because, I mean, you, you, quickly form a completely different relationship than you have made other ways by having to just be together and totally rely on each other.

We talked about everything, how that day went, where we were from, our expectations, worries about school. The most important thing is that you have a shared experience, so even if you have nothing else in common. That gives you something to talk about and bond over.

"Adventure activities, especially those that are conducted in small groups, are extremely well-suited to nurturing the formation of positive peer group development with incoming students" (Gass, 1999, p. 375). Having a small number of students on the WAFFYS trip made it comfortable for each of them to truly be a part of the group and in that process learn something

about themselves. In looking back at the WAFFYS experience the students discussed personal benefits of the program as illustrated by the following quotes:

When I came here it was like I have this entire group of friends that I like hang out with a lot that's based from WAFFYS...But like a lot of who I am here stood from friends I made at WAFFYS.

It was nice to have a smaller group of people, once had met all those people and been overwhelmed almost, and then just to come back and see this small group of people who had the same feelings that I did. That was nice.

“These meaningful peer relationships continue to be reinforced as students utilize their behaviors learned and implemented from their adventure experience in their established peer reference groups as they enter college” (Gass 1999, p. 375). Developing a strong peer connection allowed the students to explore and learn about each other and themselves and lead to the second key theme of this study, self-confidence.

Self-confidence

The students expanded their peer development and experienced increased self-confidence by successfully working with a new group of people from varied backgrounds in unfamiliar and challenging settings. An increase in self-confidence was identified by participants as the act of going out and trying something new such as backpacking, completing the physical challenge, and having that sense of accomplishment as a group at the end of the trip. The following quotes illustrate the valuable personal awareness for the participants as they acknowledged an increase in self-confidence by participating in the WAFFYS program.

It definitely helped me in the beginning (of the school year) because I was really worried about coming to Carolina. It just opened up a lot of possibilities. I think through out the year I was more willing to participate in things I probably would have never done before just like club.

I think I just had the guts to talk to people more...I was more willing to branch out and meet other people because I found out I could meet other people here and not just people from my high school.

It showed me how much strength, inner strength that I do have I'm just one of those people that if it isn't hard I don't give up, but if it is hard I just don't even try...But this was just kind of a thing, well its hard but I'm gonna finish it. And it showed me I do have strength to do stuff...It just bridged over just as a building block in my college life. It was kind of like a new, not a new personality but a new inner strength person that I was going to be in college rather than in high school.

One participant didn't necessarily feel challenged physically, which was disappointing for him at first. However, in retrospect he recognized that his self-confidence increased in regards to

working with other people. Throughout his freshman year he became conscious of the fact that there are a lot of different people in a college community and dealing with them was not always easy.

...Working with people that were different than I would otherwise choose to work with. I think WAFFYS proved to me that I can work with people that are different so maybe if I hadn't done WAFFYS I would have given up on some things that I otherwise didn't.

A positive experience in the adjustment into college can have a long lasting effect on students. Devlin (1996) found that, "...looking at risk taking and freshman-year self-confidence variables, program participants indicated they were bigger risk takers and had higher self-confidence at the beginning of their freshman year" (p.329). The participants noted an increase in self-confidence, which lead to positive feelings about themselves and a readiness to take on the challenges of college. Increasing self-confidence might not have been a specific goal for the students coming to WAFFYS, but that is what emerged for these participants.

Decision-making Skills

The third theme that emerged from this study was the importance of decision-making skills.

When the group arrived at the outdoor center they were unaware of what was ultimately ahead of them. They knew they were going backpacking and that they were going to meet new people and hopefully have some fun. The students did not realize that decision-making skills were a key element of the program. Even so, each of the students acknowledged the decision-making aspect of WAFFYS was a positive building block, because college life was full of making decisions on their own.

I thought it was going to be just like home where your parents tell you what to do and you have to do it. And it wasn't, you know, just like being in college kind of. Because we make our own decisions whether they are right or wrong. We make them ourselves.

Well I thought WAFFYS did a lot more than what I had expected to begin with, like in how we met each other and like had all these decisions to make together. You don't have your parents telling you to do anything, so you know, everything from whether to go out tonight or study. So the decision-making and all that kind of worked on giving me some confidence in social skills in things like that and also you know little things, not being woken up by the instructors. You know that definitely transferred.

I think it (WAFFYS) definitely helped me just in general. Making decisions because I guess I was like, I am on my own now and nobody is going to take care of me except myself.

The instructors gave guidance throughout the trip, but the group was responsible for making such decisions as when to stop, when to eat, which way to go, and what time to wake up. The participants quickly learned to make decisions as a group. The group took ownership for their

trip. As shown in the following quotes, the students identified that being responsible for the decisions made on the trip were valuable pieces of the experience:

I guess what was good about WAFFYS was that what we were working to get done had to be done or we couldn't sleep or we couldn't eat or couldn't do anything, so maybe that put into perspective other decisions we had to make once we got to school.

WAFFYS was probably more beneficial than other types of experiences just cause those decisions are just so much more important and have so much more weight to them. I mean just the whole being comfortable with me and other people, meeting new people and you know just being comfortable knowing that people will like you and all that kind of stuff from WAFFYS carried over to other stuff I was doing at school.

A personal investment from each of the students was made on his or her trip. While not anticipated, the decision-making aspect of the trip was defiantly a strong element within the WAFFYS experience. Transferring the skills of making decisions to the college atmosphere became an important outgrowth of the program. Besides offering a fun way to meet people, the program was able to give the students some guidance in transferring their decision-making skills beyond the trail. These students saw the relevance of making group decisions, and the experience was with them as they started to explore college life. DeBoer (1983) stated, "First year students are faced with a new social environment, new friends and new activities available to them. They must make decisions about how to apportion their time between clubs, athletics, studying and parties, among other things"(p.344).

Having the experience of participating in a challenging program such as WAFFYS, students learned that decisions were their own. Going to college is about education, but it is also about growing up, being on your own, exploring new interests, and figuring out what you want to do. As Winston, Miller, & Prince (1982) stated, "during the college years young adult students begin to gain independence from their parents, to search for a sense of autonomy, and to form concepts about themselves as separate adult persons" (p.1). Trip leaders purposefully left the decision-making to the group so that participants could experience being on their own and making choices for themselves.

Wilderness Orientation Programs (WOP) can fit into a college curriculum if the program takes the time and energy to look at what is to be gained from participating in a WOP. As M.A. O'Keefe (1989), found in her study of wilderness orientation programs around the country, there are certain activities that can help "...to increase students ability to reason well, make choices and take responsibility for those choices" (p.113).

Conclusion

In conclusion the WAFFYS experience provided participants with a positive personal and social transition into college. Three reasons support this conclusion: 1) because of the interactions the students had in the small group they were able to develop new peer relationships that transferred

to their freshman year, 2) by having a positive group interaction, participants were able to experience an increase in self-confidence that allowed each of the students to learn new things about themselves , and 3) through the awareness of decision-making skills, participants learned that the decisions they made were their own and nobody else's.

References

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- i) Peer Development
 - ii) Self-Confidence
 - iii) Decision-Making Skills
- * Callout: Testimonials (permanent graphic)