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Special Issue: Perspectives on the Value of the Camp Experience

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Abstract

This special issue brings attention to a broad range of current research that explored the varied contributions of the camp experience to positive youth development. The camp experience described in these articles included many types of programs (e.g., nature-based, sports, arts), duration (e.g., day/overnight, multi-day/multi-week), settings (e.g., wilderness, public and private natural areas), and audiences (e.g., urban/rural, children with medical needs, low income). The articles addressed topics such as 21st century skill development through camp, developmental outcomes related to career/college readiness and life success for campers and staff, developmental values of camp for specialized audiences such as medically-oriented campers, leadership development in young staff, relationship of quality programming to youth development, and relationships between nature-based experiences and youth development. All of the articles offer practical implications and applications for practice as well as contribute to theory and the body of knowledge. As with all good research, this special issue leaves the reader with new information but also identifies relevant questions for future research and evaluation.

Key words: camp research, out-of-school-time learning, youth development, outcomes, nature-based programs

Special issues of a journal always start with an idea. About 18 months ago, this special issue of *Journal of Youth Development (JYD)* highlighting the camp experience took root with an off-hand comment during a conversation with a colleague. We were talking about the value of special issues that offer a succinct “state of the research” on that topic. As we talked, we realized we could not think of a single example of a special issue focused on the camp

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Perspectives on the Value of the Camp Experience

experience, despite a rich history of interdisciplinary camp research dating back to Hedley Dimock and Charles Hendry's research on *Camping and Character* in 1929. So, we took that step with *JYD*. We are particularly excited to serve as co-editors for this special issue, because it represents our commitment to practical research at the American Camp Association: Research is only as good as the practice it influences; practice is only as good as the research it uses.

With support from the *JYD* Publications Committee, we announced the call for papers, hopeful but not entirely confident we would get enough submissions to fill an issue. We were happily surprised (and a bit overwhelmed) to receive 33 papers—enough papers to fill multiple issues—all about camp. What you see in this special *double* issue is the result of MANY people's efforts to turn an idea into reality. We want to thank the authors who submitted manuscripts for consideration, the reviewers for the 54 peer reviews they conducted, Lance Ozier for framing the issue with his "Thought Leader" piece and Karla Henderson for tying it all together with her "Reflections" piece. Finally, we want to give resounding applause to the *JYD* editorial staff for their countless hours revising and copyediting the accepted articles.

We believe this special double issue is a seminal work that offers myriad perspectives on the value of the camp experience for youth and young adult development. You will find articles focused on staff and campers, on outcomes as well as processes, on program quality, staff training, marketing, and evaluation. The articles reflect a wide range of theories and frameworks, methods, quantitative and qualitative data, and varied analyses. The research was conducted in day camps and overnight camps operated by agencies, faith-based organizations, independent non-profits, and for-profit businesses; some of the camp experiences described here are very short (2- to 3-day sessions) while others lasted for weeks. Perhaps most notable across these papers is the demographic range of the participants and the diversity of experiences, all representing camp.

Best of all, every single paper in this issue expands our understanding of the camp experience and gives researchers and practitioners alike data-driven recommendations for improving camp practices and policies. Our hope is that readers will think critically about these recommendations, as well as the challenges and opportunities camps must grapple with to thrive into the 21st century. The research in this special issue situates camp as a critical context for out-of-school-time learning by highlighting the tremendous positive impact that camp has on campers and staff.

Perspectives on the Value of the Camp Experience

We hope you enjoy *using* the research in this issue as much as we enjoyed pulling it all together.

Reference

Dimock, H.S., & Hendry, C.E. (1929). *Camping and character: A camp experiment in character education*. New York, NY: Association Press.