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Outdoor Leadership: A Question of Vision and Ethics

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Cover Page Footnote

Research Abstracts (Refereed for Presentation at Symposium)

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Outdoor education increasingly includes programs for youth-at-risk, multi-cultural groups, battered women, and other special populations. The diversity of such groups and their needs and expectations place additional demands upon the outdoor leader. "Good judgement" on a trip with seniors may not be identical to "good judgement" on a trip with youth-at-risk; group exercises appropriate for young males of color may be inappropriate for women who have been abused. The diverse populations and situations will require outdoor leaders to become more self-aware, reflective, and sensitive to culture, race, and gender differences (Greenleaf, 1970; Shapiro, 1988; Terry, 1988). Resolving conflicts and ethical differences will also include competencies in critical thinking and ethical decision-making as applied to outdoor recreation/education (Hunt, 1989; Warren, 1989). This exploratory study looked at student journal writings and papers during a course about ethical outdoor leadership that included readings from the areas of outdoor recreation and ethical leadership. The text of 26 students was analyzed using the Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis computer program (McTavish & Pirro, 1989) and traditional content analysis. Preliminary results indicate a conceptual difference between writings about ethical leadership and outdoor leadership. The students perceived the material about outdoor leadership as practical and action-oriented. They saw the information about leadership and ethics as being academic and not-very pragmatic. As the course progressed, and in their final papers, the material of both fields begins to be integrated using examples of class exercises and discussions. Students provided more ethical analysis when discussing in-class exercises and student interaction than responding directly to readings or lecture information. The use of critical thinking skills did not increase, which may reflect the lack of consistent, direct teaching of these skills. Finally, the students made small changes in applying the principles to their own leadership and ethical frameworks. Future research should address preconceptions about leadership, direct teaching of critical thinking skills and ability to describe ethical dilemmas, the role of ethical followership, and the integration of readings with class experiences for analysis and transfer of ethical leadership skills.

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