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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND OUTCOMES: PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE STUDENT ORIENTATION

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The purpose of this study was to assess participants' perceptions of program components and outcomes of a first-year college student outdoor adventure orientation (OAO) program. Qualitative, semi-structured post-trip interviews were conducted during the spring semester with 11 OAO participants.

We adopted an outcome framework for the study and used the philosophical literature on outdoor adventure education, Priest's (1999) hypotheses of the adventure experience, and Gager's (1986) model of experiential learning to identify program components (e.g., challenge) deemed to be integral program mechanisms. We then assessed the participants' description of their experience in a program component with their perceptions of program benefits. Specifically, we investigated perceived benefits, perceived challenge, group integration, leader behavior, self-knowledge, and the transfer of the experience to the first-year college experience. In addition, respondents were also asked to describe their decision to participate.

The benefits reported by the respondents reflected meeting new people, being in the outdoors, the challenge of the experience, self-understanding, and learning about teamwork and cooperation. The backpacking portion of the program was viewed as the essence of the experience. Participants reported rather ambiguous feelings about the service-learning project, as it seemed disconnected from the rest of the experience. Structured post-trip exercises on the topic of the transition to college were viewed as the most negative. While the respondents expressed apprehension about meeting others

it was also a primary reason for participating. Meeting others and the physical demands of backpacking were the challenging elements of the experience. The cooperative living situation was recognized as a demanding reality context, and the leaders' efforts to empower participant decision-making, work in small groups to accomplish tasks, and work together as a team were identified as important program features. The leaders role in the challenge-risk-trust dynamic was also recognized. Participation was motivated by the opportunity to meet people in a unique setting and participants felt this gave them practice in what they were going to have to do. There was a general sense of accomplishment and some sense of recognition that the experience could be applied in other aspects of life, but not necessarily academics. The most direct transferable outcome appeared to be the feeling of social efficacy during the first few days of the semester.

This study illustrated that for some program components, the participants' description of their experience in a particular part of the program matched what program planners would expect. However, some of the connections that theorists make between experience and outcome were not evident.