

**Summary of Results from Ali Holroyd Lien's Master's Research Project
On the Trends in Short-term Residential Outdoor Education**

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMS VISITED

I visited 18 programs including a mix of for-profits and not-for-profit organizations. The OE centers visited are in 10 different states and focus on two main topics, environmental and adventure education. Ten of the programs visited were strictly environmental education programs, three focused on adventure / team-building, three run both adventure / team-building and environmental education programs, one program runs wilderness trips with an environmental education focus, and one program focuses on leadership development. The following is a list of the programs visited and their locations:

- Boojum Institute—Pioneertown, CA
- Chewonki Foundation—Wiscasset, ME
- Fairview Lake YMCA—Newton, NJ
- Ferry Beach Ecology School—Saco, ME
- Frost Valley YMCA—Claryville, NY
- Headlands Institute—Sausalito, CA
- Hidden Villa—Los Altos Hills, CA
- Hillside Outdoor Ed. Center—Brewster, NY
- Kieve Affective Education—Nobleboro, ME
- Merrowvista—Ossipee, NH
- Mountain Trail Outdoor School—Hendersonville, NC
- Pathfinder Ranch—Mountain Center, CA
- Project Adventure—Beverly, MA
- YMCA Camp Campbell—Boulder Creek, CA
- YMCA Camp Cheerio--Glade Valley, NC/VA program too
- YMCA Camp Greenville—Cedar Mountain, NC
- YMCA Camp Jewell—Colebrook, CT
- YMCA Camp Surf—Imperial Beach, CA

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PROGRAMMING TRENDS

SCHOOL BACKGROUNDS

- All programs visited work with a mix of public and private schools. Some schools travel up to 400 miles to be a part of specific programs.
- Most common age group for Environmental Education is 5th-6th grade (range from pre-K to 8th grade).
 - *Note: The state of California encourages schools (specifically 5th-6th grade) to partake in an outdoor education experience.*
- Most common age group for Team-Building/ Adventure programs is middle school (range from 8 years-adults/corporate)

PROGRAM SET UP

- There are two main types of program set-up:
 - Set curriculum/classes for teachers to choose from (14 programs—82%)
 - Set concepts/themes that are intertwined with all groups (3 programs—18%)

PROGRAMS WITH SET CURRICULUM

- Either run 3-4 classes per day. At 1.5-2 hours each.
- Or run 1 class in the morning and one in the afternoon. Those classes tend to be around 3 hours each.
- Most programs visited are running shorter classes, but offering more of them.
- Both options have their benefits and drawbacks.

SAME OR DIFFERENT INSTRUCTORS

- Programs that have set activities and outline for the day either keep the same instructor with each group throughout their stay, or rotate instructors.
 - 58% of programs keep the same instructor with a given trail group
 - 25% of instructors rotate around to different groups, or stay with the same class/activity
 - 17% rotate groups, but stay with the same school

PROGRAMS THAT HAVE SET THEMES/CONCEPTS:

- Common concepts/themes include:
 - Adaptations
 - Geology
 - Interdependence
 - Communities
 - Stewardship and Environmental Awareness
- All programs that base their programs on themes/ concepts have the instructors stay with the groups for their entire trip in order to create consistency and intertwine the themes coherently

CLASS/ACTIVITY GROUP SIZES

- Class/trail group sizes ranged from 8-27 students. The average was around 14-15.

AVERAGE LENGTH OF PROGRAM

- Programs range from 1-5 days
- Most programs are either 3 or 5 days
- Program length breakdowns:
 - 4-5 day programs 23%

- 4 day programs 6%
- 3 or 5 day programs 12%
- 1-5 days, mainly 3 days 35%
- 3 day programs 12%
- 1 day programs 12%

STANDARDS & NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

- No Child Left Behind Act was mentioned by several programs as a challenge that is holding us, as an industry, back from providing the programs that we would like to provide.
- Emphasis for schools is now on “teaching to the test”. Rather than teaching for the sake of teaching and sharing knowledge so students will learn and grow.
- While Environmental Ed. programs are focused on addressing standards, Adventure & Team-building programs are not (necessarily). And yet, most states are required to do some form of “character education” under which many of these programs would lie.

MOST COMMON ENVIRONMENTAL ED. CLASSES

- Animal Study/Wildlife Ecology
- Forest Ecology
- Geology
- Pond/Lake Ecology
- Ecology Overview
- Survival/Wilderness Skills
- Farm lesson/organic gardening
- Pioneer Living
- Native American Studies
- Watersheds
- Live animal presentation/animal husbandry
- Adaptations

MOST COMMON ADVENTURE CLASSES

- Teambuilding (Overall MOST common activity)
- Climbing tower/wall
- Canoeing
- Orienteering
- High ropes/challenge course
- Hiking
- Initiatives
- Low Ropes/challenge course

MOST COMMON EVENING PROGRAMS

- Campfire
- Night awareness/Night hike
- Skit night
- Herpetology Or Ornithology Speakers
- Native American Lore
- Pioneer Living
- New Games
- Square Dance
- Storytellers

TRENDS IN ENVIRONMENTAL ED. PROGRAMMING

- Possibly the # 1 trend of residential environmental education is addressing state standards
- Emphasis for many programs is on stewardship and/or sustainability. Many programs are offering specific classes, or putting an emphasis throughout the program on environmental awareness, *even those programs that have an AE emphasis.*
- Pre-and post visits to schools
- Catering programs so that every program is different, in order to meet the needs and wants of each school/group.

TRENDS IN ADVENTURE PROGRAMMING

- The field of adventure programming is the fastest growing in residential outdoor education (according to several programs visited, regarding their own organization)
- Many programs are moving towards not setting time limits for adventure activities, lowering stress levels, and allowing time for the activity and processing. Flexibility is important—not being dictated by a set of pre-determined activities on a sheet of scrap paper.
- “Challenge by choice”, “challenge of choice”, “opportunity for risk” dilemma. How far should we push our participants?
- Certification of instructors

COMMON PROGRAM STRENGTHS

- Strong curriculum + top notch educators=High program quality
- Constantly trying to add and grow programs. Administrators open to change
- Program is run with ease & is very well organized. “We often hear from teachers we are a well oiled machine”.
- Long program history and tradition
- Many resources available to the staff
- Strong communication & collaboration between departments
- Offering year round programming—staff don’t have to be so transient—a goal for many programs

COMMON PROGRAM CHALLENGES

- Pressure to grow, or feeling too big already
- Being a part of a larger organization (e.g. YMCA). Profits go to other branches, salary structure is “set in stone”
- Not owning the property
- Property open to the public & anyone can walk through
- Severe weather makes for short seasons
- Tying experience into students’ communities, home-lives, and future experiences
- Wanting to work with more adults to be a more effective program
- Not enough/no indoor space

MARKETING TRENDS

Marketing techniques include:

- ✚ Offering teacher workshops
- ✚ Create a marketing plan
- ✚ Mass mailings—for the most part, programs are saying this doesn’t work. A few have had success
- ✚ Cross-market—Give summer campers outdoor ed. brochures & vice versa

- ✚ Outreach programs can often turn into residential groups
- ✚ Websites—keep ‘em up to date!

Things to consider

- ✚ There is a huge market out there for Montessori, Charter, and Independent Schools
- ✚ Many programs do “outreach” programs at schools with the potential of those programs turning into overnight/residential groups
- ✚ So...if most marketing is word of mouth, then it is out of our control, right? Is there anything we can do to be involved and encourage word of mouth marketing?
- ✚ There is plenty of room for the outdoor ed. industry to grow. As populations grow, that means there are new schools, and new schools are often looking for programs like ours

Fund raising & scholarships

- ✚ Non-profits tend to serve a mix of high and low-income groups, serving diverse populations, writing grants, etc...
- ✚ Most programs run some sort of scholarship program
- ✚ One program even adds \$1/person to the price of all programs in order to help sustain the scholarship fund

AVERAGE PROGRAM COST

✚ 1 day range:	High-\$60	Low-\$12
✚ 1 day average	\$29	
✚ 2 day extremes:	High-\$124	Low-\$58
✚ 2 day average:	\$94	
✚ 3 day extremes:	High-\$200	Low-\$95
✚ 3 day average:	\$138	
✚ 4 day extremes:	High-\$264	Low-\$128
✚ 4 day average:	\$185	
✚ 5 day extremes:	High-\$291	Low-\$138
✚ 5 day average:	\$212	

COMMON MARKETING STRENGTHS

- ✚ Custom-building programs to meet clientele needs
- ✚ Strong reputation in the community
- ✚ Diverse clientele—serving many groups, writing lots of grants and providing many opportunities
- ✚ Amazing facility and location—This was the most common answer of what programs saw as their greatest strength

COMMON MARKETING CHALLENGES

- ✚ Technology—outdated websites
- ✚ Small outdoor ed. non-profits often struggle with funding
- ✚ Relevance!
- ✚ No Child Left Behind (& Bush administration)
- ✚ Program, at times, is too flexible. No set prices for programs, etc. can be a problem
- ✚ Expensive programs, but want high quality staff who are paid a lot, in order to run high quality programs

STAFFING TRENDS

STAFF BREAKDOWN

- Programs hire in between 6-28 staff or interns
 - 13 staff members is the average
- Staff range from late-teens to early-50s
 - Average age of instructors is around 26
- Staff stay with a program from one season to 20+ years
 - Average stay with one program is around 3 seasons or a year and a half
- When looking at staff educational background trends, there really aren't any. The majority of programs hire folks with degrees in just about anything. Some programs are intentional about this with the hope that degrees other than biology, outdoor ed/rec, etc. will add to the diversity of their program

STAFF HIRING & RECRUITING

- Almost every program mentioned their staff are predominantly recruited via the internet—outdoored.com being the big one.
- There were several programs who had no need to recruit staff because 100% of their staff were returning.
- One program mentioned recruiting happened almost 100% via word of mouth.
- Several programs hire international staff, and a couple even run their program with the majority of their staff being international. Networks for finding international staff include ICCP & the Gap program.

STAFF PACKAGE & BENEFITS

- Staff salaries range greatly (note: these statistics are a bit skewed from California's high standard of living)
 - Salaries range from \$23/day (an internship program) to \$225/day (lead facilitator for contract adventure program)
 - Range for residential programs is \$40/day to \$130
 - Average base pay is around \$60.40/day
 - Average pay is around \$63/day
 - Average ceiling pay is around \$81/day
- Benefits offered range from room and board to medical, dental, retirement, etc.
 - 62% offer medical insurance
 - 15% offer catastrophic medical
 - 23% offer no medical insurance
 - 21% offer retirement
 - 21% offer 21 meals/week guaranteed

OTHER STAFF PERKS

- Computer use —Several programs allow staff to check email and use the internet in the office. About 25% have internet hook-up in staff housing units
- Staff Housing
 - The majority of programs offer either one large communal house (47%) or several smaller houses or apartments (35%). Staff live off-site at 3 of the programs (18%)
- Closest Town
 - 69% are 10-15 minutes from nearest town
 - 19% are 20-30 minutes from nearest town
 - 12% are 1 hour from the nearest town

- Legal drinking?
 - Several programs allow staff to drink on the property, and several others do not. It's right around a 50/50 split.

STAFF RETENTION TRENDS

- It is probably no surprise that the programs that have managed to create “sustainable educator” positions have very high retention rates.
- Programs that pay their staff well and provide benefits (medical, retirement, and other) have created positions that can be a career, and not just a seasonal job. Many of these programs have instructors that have been working for them for 10, 15, and close to 20 years!
- Programs where staff live off site have lower burnout rates than when they live on site. Is it bad to have high turnover?
 - Good=New energy, young instructors, excitement. Not stagnant, not fed up with system
 - Bad=Inexperienced teachers, consistent training

LENGTH OF SEASON & WINTER WORK

- 38% of the programs visited are open the entire school-year
- 25% are open for 2 months in Fall & Spring
- 19% are open for 3 months in Fall & Spring
- 19% are open for 4 months in Fall & Spring
- 59% of programs offer no winter work
- 41% of programs offer winter work for some or all staff

STAFF TRAINING

- Pre-Season Staff Training Options:
 - 50% run a 1 week training
 - 21% run a 2 week training
 - 14% run a 3 week training
 - 7% run a 3-day training
 - 7% run a 1 week new staff training, and a 1 week all staff training

TOPICS OF STAFF TRAINING INCLUDE

- History of program
- Philosophy of experiential education
- Pedagogy of the program
- Teaching methods
- Curriculum design
- Theory of facilitation
- Team-building/staff bonding
- Protocols & risk management
- Staff retreat
- Practice teaches

IN-SERVICES

- Most programs have staff meetings on Mondays & Fridays. Some meet on Wednesdays instead.
- Many programs offer in-services throughout the season on specific topics and activity areas as suggested by the program staff or supervisors.

- Mix between instructors, supervisors, and guest speakers running in-services

TRENDS WITH STAFF SCHEDULES

- Staff work in between 4 & 6 days/week.
- The majority of programs commit staff to a 5-day work week; not necessarily Monday-Friday.
- Other options included random scheduling whenever they're needed, a solid Monday-Friday schedule, being guaranteed "one day off/week", and a four day week—Tuesday-Friday

EVENING PROGRAMS

- Staff work in between 0-4 evening programs per week.
- Surprisingly, many programs are having staff work up to 3 nights per week.
- Here are the breakdowns
 - 4 nights=13%
 - 3-4 nights=20%
 - 2-3 nights=13%
 - 2 nights=13%
 - 1-2 nights=28%
 - 0 nights=13%

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES

- All staff have teaching responsibilities. Some programs have field instructors design their own activities, whereas some are following a curriculum guide.
- 94% of the programs have their staff do some sort of project or program support when they are not teaching. Most of these projects are designed to meet the skills, and passions of the staff member
- Many programs have lead instructors or assistant coordinators who are given more responsibility and have specific projects & job descriptions

COMMUNITY

- Finding balance with community. Strong community leads to less turnover (McCole's research).
- Community can be an amazing thing, but can create conflict when folks live, eat, and work together. Is it possible to have too much community?

COMMON STAFFING STRENGTHS

- Comprehensive staff package leads to low turnover
- Experienced Staff
- Sense of community
- Strong and supportive senior staff
- Staff are committed to making the world a better place & instilling a sense of wonder in participants

COMMON STAFFING CHALLENGES

Overall, the most common challenges mentioned were avoiding staff turnover, unable to pay enough, being understaffed.

- Staff are too busy, too many responsibilities
- Housing for staff can be an issue
- Not enough contract staff
- Finding staff with a variety of interest & skills