SEER 2008 ABSTRACT

Outcomes of a Spiritually Focused Wilderness Orientation Program

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Researchers have been studying the conditions that matter in supporting the successful transition and persistence of students to the collegiate environment for more than three decades (Astin, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1989). As first suggested by Sanford (1962, 1967), for students to be successful they must be both challenged with educational experiences that foster learning and personal development and supported by the college environment. Recently, a focus on students’ spiritual formation as an important aspect of higher education has emerged. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) share concern that higher education has for far too long encouraged the development of fragmented and inauthentic lives by ignoring the “inner” development of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding among college students. For institutions to support students holistically, attention must be given to both the internal and external realm of the students’ experiences. One common way institutions begin to support students in their transition to college life is through orientation programs and, more specifically, wilderness orientation programs offered at the beginning of the academic year.

The wilderness orientation program studied is Montreat College’s Wilderness Journey for First Year Students (WJFYS) —an Outward Bound-type wilderness experience program. The program includes the instruction of technical skills necessary for safe and efficient backcountry travel, as well as group and personal enjoyment. These skills are secondary to the goals of the program, which include Christian discipleship, stewardship,
leadership, and service, all facilitated through a small-group expedition in the wilderness. WJFYS is unique in its design because of its length (12–14 days) and its overt focus on the use of the wilderness as a catalyst for spiritual development.

Given the increase in campus initiatives aimed at assisting new students through wilderness orientation programs (Bell, 2008; Galloway, 2000) and the emphasis on examining students’ spiritual formation, further research investigating the outcomes of such programs is warranted. Few wilderness orientation programs currently operate for 12–14 days (Bell, 2008) and even fewer utilize the wilderness expedition as a tool for spiritual growth. This study was intended to uncover the meaning of such experiences through the student’s perspective. The research question guiding this exploratory study was to understand the students’ perceptions of a spiritually focused wilderness orientation program and the influence of their participation in the program on their transition to college.

Methods

The WJFYS course (OE 181) was open to any new student (freshman or transfer) who was physically capable and met the application deadline. The students arrived on campus to participate in a wilderness expedition 12 days prior to the regular New Student Orientation (NSO) required of all new students. The WJFYS students continued to meet throughout the fall semester in order to provide support through their transition to the college. During the program year studied, there were 11 students (four transfers and seven freshmen) and two instructors (a professor of Outdoor Education and an upper-class student) involved in WJFYS. All eleven WJFYS students participated in the study. There was also a control group (n = 9) utilized for part of the study that included students who participated in the New Student Orientation but not the WJFYS program.

This investigation utilized a mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) as a means of combining qualitative and quantitative methods for exploring the students’ perceptions of their experience during the WJFYS course. This study employed three phases of data collection. Phase 1 included analysis of a 3–5 page essay written by the WJFYS students one month after the expedition. Phase 2 involved administering the Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire (SACQ) one month after the start of the fall semester to the WJFYS students and the control group. The results from the SACQ were used to help identify areas of further inquiry. The sample size was not large enough to provide any generalizations from the findings of the SACQ. Phase 3 was a focus group interview conducted with the WJFYS students at the end of their first semester at the college in order to better understand the influence of their participation in the wilderness orientation program on their transition. The data collected from the SACQ was explored through descriptive statistics, tested for
normality and an independent t-test was used to test for significant differences between the WJFYS students and the control group. Throughout the qualitative data analysis, elements of the Constant Comparative Method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) served as a guide, whereby emerging themes were constantly compared with new data being analyzed. Specifically, the data analysis process followed the steps outlined in part by Tesch (1990) and Vaughn, Shay & Sinagub (1996), which assisted the researchers in the reduction and interpretation of the text.

**Results**

Analysis of the data collected from the SACQ indicated that students who attended the wilderness orientation program performed significantly higher on the SACQ Full Scale \( (p < .01) \) and on three of the four subscales: Social Adjustment \( (p < .01) \); Personal-Emotional Adjustment \( (p < .01) \); and Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment \( (p < .05) \). While the WJFYS students also scored higher on the Academic Adjustment subscale, the results were not significant. The following major themes emerged from the qualitative data collected both through the post-expedition essays and the focus group interview at the end of the semester: (a) the wilderness journey establishes community; (b) the wilderness journey facilitates developing competence; (c) the wilderness journey enhances a sense of stewardship–responsibility to care; (d) the wilderness journey promotes spiritual development through an increased trust in God, an increased communion with God, an increased awareness of one’s personal faith, and an environment that supports faith development.

**Discussion**

This study provides insight into the experiences of new students who participated in a spiritually focused college wilderness orientation program. The results are meaningful in answering some of the questions asked by both those involved in traditional new-student transition programs and those providing wilderness orientation programs, including those focused on the spiritual formation of college students. The themes that emerged from this study indicate four overarching categories that the students recognized as important related to their experience: (a) community; (b) developing competence; (c) stewardship; and (d) spiritual development. Those interested in the quality of new students’ transition should consider ways in which their programs can utilize small-group experiences that require problem-solving and teamwork within an authentic environment to enhance students’ ability to make connections with their peer group and the institution. In addition, one of the key findings of this study was the role of environment in creating space for students to explore their spirituality through reflection. The challenge to those
involved in college students’ lives is to reduce distractions and encourage regular reflection during life on campus.

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References


