

Values, Obstacles, and Needs of Campus Outdoor Programs to Serve Local Underserved Communities

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Abstract

Although participation in outdoor recreation activities is a right and is essential for the health of individuals and their communities, not all communities have access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Fortunately, many successful outdoor programs at colleges and universities are already in place around the country. These programs have the potential to extend services outside the campus and reach underserved communities. In this research note, we report the findings of focus groups held at the 2015 Association for Outdoor Recreation and Education Annual Conference with administrators of outdoor programs. Challenges, benefits, and needs were identified in extending services, including administrative limitations, human resources issues, and logistical constraints. Potential solutions include reprioritization if programs are to reach out to local underserved communities.

KEYWORDS: underserved communities; college outdoor programs; outdoor recreation; barriers

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For the individual who possesses enough disposable income, lives in an area with safe access to outdoor spaces, and has the physical ability to participate in outdoor recreation activities, spending leisure time paddling or going for a hike on the local trails is an easy task. Unfortunately, this privilege does not apply to all Americans. One study identified 17 constraints related to health, safety, socioeconomic, and other factors to participating in outdoor recreation (Ghimire, Green, Poudyal, & Cordell, 2014). Items such as transportation, cost of activities (Mowen, Payne, & Scott, 2005; Shores, Scott, & Floyd, 2007), fear of discrimination (Phillip, 2000), lack of knowledge (Bustam, Thapa, & Buta, 2011), and lack of diverse staff (Schwartz & Corkery, 2011) are examples of these constraints. Developing a better understanding of various barriers can help outdoor recreation programs plan, reach, and offer activities to diverse populations.

Fortunately, many outdoor recreation programs exist at colleges and universities around the country. Hundreds of higher education institutions offer outdoor programs to their students and in some cases to their local community members. For most of these programs, students are the primary beneficiaries, as participants or in the role of leaders. Several researchers have looked at the benefits gained by student participants and have found positive outcomes with academics (Brown, 1998; Gass, 1987; Vlamis, Bell, & Gass, 2011), stress and anxiety (Frauman & Waryold, 2009; Kanters, Bristol, & Attarian, 2002), health and wellness (Forrester, Arterberry, & Barcelona, 2006), life effectiveness skills (Flood, Gardner, & Cooper, 2009; Frauman & Waryold, 2009), and environmental awareness (Jackson, 1986; Marchand, 2014; Tarrant & Green, 1999). Scholars have also reported that these outcomes occur through regular participation in outdoor recreation activities, such as the health benefits of spending time in nature, specifically stress reduction and overall health and wellness benefits (Godbey, 2009; Overholt, 2012).

Campus outdoor recreation programs have the opportunity to be significant players in providing outdoor opportunities outside their regular campus clientele. Community partnerships can assist in tackling community issues, developing new opportunities for research, and providing students real-life experiences (Kellest & Goldstein, 1999). In a study of community partnerships with local organizations, Hogner and Kenworthy (2010) reported that students developed their awareness and learning as global citizens. Cortese (2003) argued that higher education plays a critical role in developing a sustainable future, including making sure that all humans reach their full economic and social potential. There is evidence and opportunity for higher education institutions to reach underserved populations in their community and be successful (Blazer, 2016; Holland & Gelmon, 1998). Outdoor recreation programs can also be part of this change. Further, they have the ethical duty to do so as they educate their own students to be positive community members.

In this research note, we report the findings of focus groups conducted in November 2015 at the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education Annual Conference held in Atlanta, Georgia. The aim of this exploratory study was to examine the benefits, challenges, and resources needed for colleges and universities to offer outdoor recreation programming to local underserved communities. The sample included colleges and universities ($n = 12$) that were currently offering or had a desire to offer outdoor recreation programs to local community members, specifically underserved communities. For this exploratory study, underserved communities were defined as groups of individuals that historically have had limited access to or participation in outdoor recreation opportunities (e.g., hiking, biking, fishing, skiing) and that may face barriers to participation in those activities (e.g., income, physical access, discrimination).

In this exploratory study, we found challenges in four areas including institutional, human, legal, and logistical. For the purpose of this research note, these are some of the most commonly mentioned. Institutionally, the most common challenge was prioritization and mission statement that did not align with the possibility of reaching communities outside the college. More specifically, many outdoor recreation programs use student fees to subsidize their activities

and face the challenge of justifying the use of those funds for nonstudent participants. Human challenges refer to the needs and challenges of students, staff, and outside communities. Most commonly, these include issues with hiring and training enough staff to lead trips properly and with a lack of disposable income from underserved individuals. Legally, many programs face noncompete clauses with local organizations, meeting insurance coverage needs, dealing with minimum wages and maximum work hours restrictions, and issues with permits and group sizes on public land. Finally, transportation and parking issues, either to access the program headquarters or the program activity site, and transportation of minors in university vehicles were reported as important challenges. Benefits were also revealed, and those more commonly reported were the potential for additional revenue, marketing material to recruit and retain future students, educational benefits for staff and participants, new research opportunities, and health benefits to participants.

Participants were also asked what resources were needed for them to plan and offer programming to underserved communities. Administratively, programs reported needing additional funds as the most important barrier for outreach and hiring. They also indicated that they needed their institution to review their mission and priorities to include serving local community members. Human needs included the ability to hire and train a more diverse pool of leaders and the development of outdoor recreation programs that would better appeal to various community members.

These findings led to several conclusions. First, college and university outdoor recreation programs need to examine the pros and the cons of offering outdoor recreation outside their institution, specifically to underserved communities, and decide how this aligns with their institution's priorities and mission. The first step is to revisit the priorities of each program. If offering programs outside the college is valued, organizations should revisit their legal and risk management policies, develop activities that will appeal to diverse individuals, and find ways to make these activities affordable and valuable for future participants. Finally, programs offered to underserved communities will have more success if staff outdoor leaders are properly trained to work with the specific populations they are leading and can create experiences that will raise the value of outdoor recreation. There is no doubt that a more diverse pool of staff leaders will also help achieve these goals.

Colleges and universities have an opportunity to be part of the movement to increase access to outdoor recreation for all Americans. Many of these colleges and universities already have well-developed programs that could assist more individuals and allow those individuals to benefit from the same positive outcomes that college students currently report. It is worth noting that the recommendations from this exploratory study come directly from the outdoor programs themselves. Having the voice of community organizations would likely result in more findings and better information to understand how to reach and serve those communities and individuals. We encourage collegiate outdoor programs to explore such partnerships in future studies to gain a broader sense of priorities, barriers, and solutions.

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