

# **Assessing the Value of a College Degree in Outdoor Education or Recreation: Institutional Comparisons Using the College Scorecard and Surveys of Faculty and Employers**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we report on research undertaken in 2016 to assess a number of trends influencing the current status of degree-granting outdoor programs in the United States, including factors that bear on the value of degrees. We analyze data provided by the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard and results of a survey comparing 59 programs in the United States by size, geographic region, and public/private status, focusing on cost, postgraduate employment, and select program features tied to alumni employability. Results are discussed in the context of wider trends in higher education, projections for job growth in outdoor areas, and preferred qualifications as reported by employers. Findings are useful for identifying challenges and opportunities for active outdoor fields as a whole and may help individual programs situate themselves among comparators in a way that informs future planning.

**KEYWORDS:** higher education cost; outdoor education; outdoor recreation; degree value

Colleges and universities in the United States have for decades awarded undergraduate and graduate degrees to emerging professionals in outdoor education and adventure recreation (Attarian, 2001; Jensen & Guthrie, 2006; Smathers, 1974). As with many fields that straddle academic and professional preparation, the nature and viability of programs in outdoor education and adventure recreation are influenced by wider cultural trends, shifting educational and human service priorities, and changes in outdoor use and access. Today, an increasing number of specialized academic programs compete in the higher education marketplace, where applicants have unprecedented access to information. College costs have also increased at rates above inflation, and programs are now being asked to justify debt loads, explain their value in terms of return on investment, and adopt more flexible instructional methods, in addition to serving core functions of professional training and liberal education (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Understanding the current status of academic outdoor programs is difficult to achieve without a comprehensive picture of the landscape they inhabit.

The research presented here is part of a survey-based study of the status of U.S. academic programs that award degrees in outdoor education and recreation. We emphasize programs that prepare future professionals for direct-service careers involving the management and facilitation of active outdoor pursuits and focus on aspects of degree value including cost, employability, and career preparedness. We address the following questions: How much does a 4-year degree in outdoor education cost at different institutions and in different areas of the country? What kinds of work do alumni pursue after graduation, and what is the likely availability of jobs in the future? What skills and qualifications are most valued by employers, and are these aligned with program priorities? Answers to these questions can help faculty and administrators situate programs to better assess the value of the degrees they confer at their own institutions and/or adapt in ways that will help them to remain viable in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive higher education arena.

## Review of the Literature

### Evolution of Degree-Granting Outdoor Programs

Throughout much of the 20th century, colleges and universities in the United States have offered degrees that include training for direct-service work in the outdoors to achieve educational and human service aims. Subject area content and camp-style living were emphasized during the resident camping education movement from the 1930s to the 1960s, and wilderness, adventure, and outdoor experiential programs as a means for self-actualization and small group development rose to prominence after the 1970s (Hammerman, 1980; Quay & Seaman, 2013). During this time, risk recreation also experienced increasing professionalization and specialization (Allen, 1980; Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). Degree-granting programs adapted accordingly and began focusing their training and study on “outdoor pursuits” (Smathers, 1974) as a legitimate area in its own right, separate from the aims of the wider progressive education movement (Adams & Reynolds, 1981). Names for this work now include adventure education, outdoor experiential education, outdoor adventure recreation, adventure programming, and outdoor leadership. These historical changes blurred the lines between education, recreation, youth work, and mental health counseling (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000; James, 1993), and the expanding vocabulary complicated the task of aligning programs with any specific discipline. In the remainder of this article, we use the phrase *outdoor education* to refer to the programs emphasized in this study and the field of practice for which they prepare emerging professionals.

As the meanings of outdoor education have shifted over time, academic departments and disciplinary labels have followed suit. It can therefore be difficult to gauge growth or decline in degree-granting programs with any certainty. A rough assessment can be made from figures provided in the literature, however. In 1970, van der Smissen and Joyce produced a bibliography

of nearly 4,000 theses and dissertations published on recreation, camping, and outdoor education to that point, suggesting a longstanding and robust interest in the area at all levels in the academy and across many areas. Several prominent institutions contributed abundantly to this list, including Boston University, Columbia University Teachers College, New York University, the University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, Springfield College, and the University of Texas, even though not all of these institutions granted degrees in outdoor education.

In 1961, Freeberg and Taylor estimated that 32 colleges and universities “require field experience as part of the camp leadership and outdoor education leadership training program” (p. 399). Consistent with the historical record, they also noted that the topic cut across disciplinary and departmental boundaries, making it difficult to locate specific programs, but nonetheless their report indicates that outdoor training has long been featured in different academic majors. More recently, Attarian (2001) cited statistics from the Society of Park and Recreation Educators showing an increase in specialized professional preparation programs from 17 in 1987 to 41 in 2001, a trend predicted by Ewert (1987) and observed also by Jensen and Guthrie (2006). Still, because of the limited information available on the number of specialized programs currently in existence, their geographic concentration, and the type of institutions they represent, it is difficult for programs to assess how they compare on a national or even regional scale, which complicates efforts to adapt to higher education trends.

### **Degree Value and Cost**

In their commentaries on specialized outdoor degrees, Plaut (2001) and Jensen and Guthrie (2006) asserted that a degree in outdoor education is not necessary to work in the field. Indeed, Hodge, Hill, and Brinton (2012) found recreation administrators possessing a master’s degree in outdoor recreation to be paid less than administrators with advanced degrees in business or other areas. Current salary estimates and job projections differ for positions that are likely to be filled by those with specialized baccalaureate degrees. Hodge et al. cited statistics from *Careers in Recreation*, which showed an entry-level salary range of \$20,000–\$40,000 (p. 23). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) estimates a median salary of \$22,620 for recreation workers, with no bachelor’s degree required, and the median salary for therapeutic specialists is \$44,000 with a bachelor’s degree and certification. These figures vary geographically (Manekin & Rucker, 2013) and rise with longevity and career advancement; the median salary for director and coordinator positions in Hodge et al.’s study was \$61,781 after an average of 17 years experience, and this included recipients of bachelor’s degrees and recipients of master’s degrees.

Despite the modest starting salaries, current career projections suggest strong growth in outdoor recreation and youth work fields, the nomenclature that seems to capture many of the current types of jobs for which emerging outdoor education graduates are likely to apply, outside of credentialed areas (teaching, mental health counseling). The Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) estimates \$51 billion in spending across 360 million visits to federal recreation sites, supporting 880,000 jobs (English, 2014). A 2011 report for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation reports that outdoor recreation generates 6,435,000 jobs and contributes \$730 billion annually to the U.S. economy (Southwick Associates, 2011). The Outdoor Industry Foundation cited similar figures in 2012 and ranked outdoor recreation as the third largest economic sector in the United States, with a “ripple effect” that contributes to an additional 12 million jobs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts jobs in the recreation sector will grow by over 10% nationally by 2024. These numbers are prompting observers in the public and private sectors to urge greater recognition of the area’s economic importance (Lee-Ashley, Moser, & Madowitz, 2015).

In step with a rising economic impact, analysts predict robust outdoor sector employment into the future, with salaries that begin below the median for individuals with bachelor’s degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) but increase with longevity and further educa-

tion. These are promising trends. However, the cost of an undergraduate education is also rising, which could be a limiting factor in the assessment of specialized degree value. A joint 2012 paper by the U.S. Treasury and Education departments reports a roughly 50% increase in “sticker price” from 1991–2013 in private and public institutions for in- and out-of-state students, commensurate with a decline in state appropriations for higher education. These cost trends prompted the Department of Education to create the College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>) in 2012 so applicants could compare institutions across a number of metrics, from cost, to completion rate, to employment rate, to average loan debt.

The prevalence of cost factors in decision making, although an understandable reality for most college-bound young adults, has a downside; it might inadvertently contribute to a consumerist orientation to higher education, eclipsing other less measurable values such as growing a field’s intellectual capital and preparing citizens for engagement in a liberal democracy (Hart Research Associates, 2013; Plaut, 2001). Today’s actual cost of a degree and the psychological attitudes toward college affordability could pose challenges to degree-granting outdoor programs, despite strong growth projections in the outdoor sector. How do various outdoor degree programs across the United States figure in this landscape?

## Method

For this study, we surveyed degree-granting outdoor programs and likely employers of program graduates. Ninety-six institutions with degree-granting programs were identified using the mailing lists of the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) and the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE), the website [outdoored.com](http://outdoored.com), Internet search engines, and our own personal knowledge and that of colleagues. As a result, our sample included programs focused mainly on the direct-service outdoor adventure area and omitted programs that might emphasize environmental education, wildlands management, or tourism, even though there is some permeability between these areas.

Once programs were identified, we invited program faculty via e-mail to complete a descriptive online questionnaire. In the survey, housed on Qualtrics, participants were asked questions related to program demographics, enrollment estimates, and employment trends (specific questions available upon request). To respect participants’ time, we collected publicly available information about institutions separately from the survey via website searches. This method was used to enter information into the database from Indiana University’s Carnegie Classification System and the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard. A separate survey on employers’ preferred hiring qualifications was sent to 500 members of the AEE and AORE mailing lists representing this category, resulting in 134 responses (response rate: 27%). We used basic descriptive statistics and comparisons of means for analysis, as reported below.

## Results

From the initial pool of 96 higher education institutions with degree-granting programs, 107 responses were collected representing 84 institutions. We averaged responses from multiple faculty members at the same institution to use the institution as the unit of analysis. Twenty-five responses were omitted because the respondent’s institution did not award a 4-year, major degree in an outdoor field. The final sample included 59 programs, for a 61% response rate.

### Student Composition and Program Distribution

We asked faculty to report program demographics for gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Table 1 shows student demographics, and Table 2 shows program distribution by relevant Carnegie categories.

**Table 1**  
*Student Demographics*

Demographic	%
Gender	
Female	43
Male	56
Transgender/questioning	1
Age	
< 22	69
22–25	23
> 25	8
Race/ethnicity	
African American	2
Asian	3
Latino/a	4
White	88
Other	2

**Table 2**  
*Carnegie Category Composition*

Carnegie category	<i>n</i> (%)
Carnegie Type	
Public	40 (68%)
Private	19 (32%)
Carnegie Size Classification	
Very Small (<1000)	10 (17%)
Small (1,000–2,999)	12 (20%)
Medium (3,000–9,999)	17 (29%)
Large (>10,000)	20 (34%)
Geographic (Census) Regions	
Northeast	16 (27%)
South	13 (22%)
Midwest	12 (20%)
West	18 (31%)

## Cost

To represent the information most comprehensively, we first present cost figures in the aggregate and then by different Carnegie categories for purposes of comparison, and at different levels of expected family contribution; at the sticker (advertised) price; and the average net price, or the amount people actually pay (Table 3). Cost figures for out-of-state students at public institutions are not provided on the College Scorecard and thus were not included in our analysis; inferences about the comparisons below should therefore be made with caution. We discuss this point later.

**Table 3***Cost Comparisons by Category at Different Contribution Levels (N = 59)*

Category <i>M (SD)</i>	Sticker price <i>M (SD)</i>	Net cost <i>M (SD)</i>	Family income level				
			\$0–\$30,000 <i>M (SD)</i>	\$30,001–\$48,000 <i>M (SD)</i>	\$48,001–\$75,000 <i>M (SD)</i>	\$75,001–\$110,000 <i>M (SD)</i>	≥ \$110,001 <i>M (SD)</i>
Type							
Public in-state	\$20,444 (\$4,279)	\$14,300 (\$4,075)	\$10,169 (\$2,713)	\$11,857 (\$3,054)	\$14,917 (\$3,271)	\$17,601 (\$4,003)	\$18,251 (\$4,532)
Private	\$39,579 (\$7,530)	\$22,325 (\$4,929)	\$18,133 (\$4,315)	\$18,823 (\$4,680)	\$21,301 (\$4,298)	\$24,638 (\$4,848)	\$27,629 (\$7,530)
Size							
Very small	\$38,300 (\$4,620)	\$21,278 <sup>a</sup> (\$3,031)	\$16,851 (\$2,158)	\$17,759 (\$4,554)	\$20,799 (\$3,615)	\$24,549 (\$4,208)	\$26,915 (\$5,941)
Small	\$33,200 (\$12,848)	\$17,996 <sup>ab</sup> (\$7,468)	\$14,960 (\$6,460)	\$15,841 (\$5,149)	\$17,714 (\$5,276)	\$20,536 (\$6,513)	\$23,425 (\$8,363)
Medium	\$20,800 (\$6,961)	\$14,149 <sup>b</sup> (\$3,845)	\$10,396 (\$3,004)	\$12,094 (\$3,524)	\$14,908 (\$3,009)	\$17,264 (\$3,607)	\$17,944 (\$4,028)
Large	\$23,050 (\$8,300)	\$16,347 <sup>ab</sup> (\$5,811)	\$11,343 (\$4,767)	\$12,933 (\$4,812)	\$16,371 (\$4,991)	\$19,484 (\$5,286)	\$20,244 (\$6,570)
Region							
Northeast	\$33,375 (\$11,272)	\$21,254 <sup>a</sup> (\$5,388)	\$16,316 (\$5,335)	\$17,073 (\$4,608)	\$20,148 (\$4,001)	\$24,173 (\$4,728)	\$26,540 (\$3,239)
South	\$29,167 (\$10,895)	\$16,824 <sup>ab</sup> (\$6,407)	\$13,058 (\$5,798)	\$14,375 (\$5,908)	\$16,884 (\$5,643)	\$18,825 (\$5,982)	\$20,328 (\$7,418)
Midwest	\$21,667 (\$6,315)	\$15,303 <sup>b</sup> (\$2,151)	\$10,614 (\$1,845)	\$12,239 (\$2,069)	\$15,314 (\$2,025)	\$18,155 (\$2,572)	\$18,196 (\$3,571)
West	\$22,933 (\$9,520)	\$14,100 <sup>b</sup> (\$5,206)	\$10,747 (\$3,744)	\$12,502 (\$4,656)	\$15,321 (\$4,627)	\$17,953 (\$5,119)	\$19,381 (\$6,672)

Note. Superscripts denote Tukey post hoc significant differences within size and region of schools.

Annual net price across all institutions ranged from \$5,962 to \$32,520 ( $M = \$16,885$ ,  $SD = \$5,745$ ), which was substantially lower than the sticker price ranging from \$13,000 to \$58,000 ( $M = \$27,055$ ,  $SD = \$10,728$ ) and is only slightly above the national average of \$16,574. We compared means using independent samples  $t$  tests and found significant differences between net costs at public in-state and private institutions at the  $p = .000$  level. Comparisons of means using ANOVA with Tukey post hoc were computed for overall net cost in all other Carnegie categories, and we found the following differences. Size: Very small schools were significantly more expensive than medium-sized schools ( $p = .008$ ); no other differences were found that achieved significance below a .05 level. Region: Compared to schools in the Northeast, Midwest ( $p = .001$ ) and West ( $p = .018$ ) were significantly less expensive; cost of schools in the South did not differ from any other region.

## Federal Lending and Debt

The College Scorecard provides the following information regarding college federal lending and debt information: percentage of students on federal loans (overall  $M = 57\%$ ,  $SD = 16.6$ ), average overall debt amounts (excluding private loans;  $M = \$21,844$ ,  $SD = \$4,298$ ), average monthly payment ( $M = \$243$ ,  $SD = \$47.83$ ), and percentage of students who successfully pay off their student loans ( $M = 82.5$ ,  $SD = 9.35$ ; national average: 66%). We should note here that because the College Scorecard only reports federal loan debt, the overall debt amounts are likely underestimated in our analysis. For example, figures obtained from the Institute for College Access and Success's Project on Student Debt (<http://ticas.org/posd/map-state-data-2015>) were 24% higher on average than those provided on the College Scorecard, for institutions in our sample. Table 4 reports the mean (and standard deviation) of these figures for each of the Carnegie categories, as above.

Independent samples  $t$  tests indicate that in-state students at public institutions are significantly less likely to receive federal loans ( $M = 52\%$ ,  $SD = 15.8$ ;  $M = 69\%$ ,  $SD = 11.9$ ;  $p = .000$ ), face less overall debt ( $M = \$20,945$ ,  $SD = \$4,389$ ;  $M = \$23,735$ ,  $SD = \$3,495$ ;  $p = .018$ ), and pay smaller monthly student loan payments ( $M = \$232.63$ ,  $SD = \$48.84$ ;  $M = \$263.68$ ,  $SD = \$38.90$ ;  $p = .018$ ). There was no difference in graduates' likelihood of paying off loans.

**Size.** One-way ANOVA with Tukey post hoc revealed that students at very small schools receive federal loans more than students at medium ( $p = .046$ ) and large ( $p = .003$ ) schools, but not students at small schools. No other differences were found across the sizes for any other item.

**Region.** One-way ANOVA with Tukey post hoc showed significant differences for a number of items across census regions. Colleges in the West give significantly fewer students financial aid than do those in the Northeast ( $p = .000$ ), South ( $p = .034$ ), and Midwest ( $p = .014$ ); no differences existed between any of the other regions. Despite the apparent lower loan distribution, graduates from the West region carry significantly less debt than do graduates from colleges in the Northeast ( $p = .000$ ), South ( $p = .011$ ), and Midwest ( $p = .000$ ); no differences existed between any of the other regions. Accordingly, graduates from the West region also pay less per month on their college loans than do graduates from colleges in the Northeast ( $p = .000$ ), South ( $p = .011$ ), and Midwest ( $p = .000$ ); no differences existed between any of the other regions. Students from all regions were equally likely to retire their student debt successfully.

**Table 4**  
*Lending and Debt Figures in Each Carnegie Category (N = 59)*

Category	% of students on federal loans <i>M (SD)</i>	Overall debt amount <i>M (SD)</i>	Average month- ly loan payment <i>M (SD)</i>	% of graduates retiring loans <i>M (SD)</i>
Type				
Public in-state	52 (15.8)	\$20,945 (\$4,389)	\$232.63 (\$48.84)	81 (10.4)
Private	68 (11.9)	\$23,735 (\$3,495)	\$263.68 (\$38.90)	85 (6.3)
Size				
Very small	71 (8.9) <sup>a</sup>	\$24,135 (\$3,485)	\$268.20 (\$38.70)	83 (6.0)
Small	60 (20.2) <sup>ab</sup>	\$21,913 (\$4,862)	\$243.33 (\$54.18)	80 (14.9)
Medium	55 (16.5) <sup>b</sup>	\$20,849 (\$4,833)	\$231.59 (\$53.69)	81 (8.5)
Large	50 (13.0) <sup>b</sup>	\$21,501 (\$3,677)	\$238.80 (\$40.98)	85 (7.0)
Region				
Northeast	70 (10.3) <sup>a</sup>	\$24,400 (\$3,239)	\$271.06 (\$36.03) <sup>a</sup>	86 (6.4)
South	58 (9.8) <sup>a</sup>	\$22,089 (\$3,899)	\$245.38 (\$43.47) <sup>a</sup>	82 (10.9)
Midwest	60 (9.4) <sup>a</sup>	\$23,886 (\$1,981)	\$265.33 (\$22.07) <sup>a</sup>	83 (7.3)
West	44 (19.6) <sup>b</sup>	\$18,033 (\$3,999)	\$200.22 (\$44.46) <sup>b</sup>	79 (10.8)

*Note.* Superscripts denote Tukey post hoc significant differences within size and region of schools.

## Graduation Rates and Employment Statistics

Several pertinent variables, beyond income, inform decisions about value. Here, we continue to report information provided on the College Scorecard as in previous sections, and we also report the findings from the survey of academic outdoor programs relevant to postgraduate employment.

Three of the items provided on the College Scorecard help to assess the likelihood of earning a degree within 6 years and future earning potential: graduation rate (percentage of students finishing < 6 years;  $M = 49.9$ ,  $SD = 15.7$ ), average salary 10 years after starting college ( $M = \$38,726$ ,  $SD = \$6,509$ ), and percentage of graduates earning more than \$25,000 six years after starting college ( $M = 59\%$ ,  $SD = 10.5$ ). Colleges in our sample have a 16% higher graduation rate than the national average of 43%, with graduates earning an average of 13% more 10 years after starting college than the national average of \$34,300. Table 5 breaks this down into the Carnegie categories, and reports the percentage difference from the national average where applicable.



**Table 5**  
*College Completion Rates and Indicators of Earning Potential*

Category	Graduation rate	% diff vs. US avg.	Average salary 10 years after starting	% diff vs. US avg.	% earning > \$25K
Type					
Public in-state	49% (17.3)	+15%	\$39,893 (\$6,462)	+16%	62% (9.0)
Private	51% (11.7)	+19%	\$36,133 (\$5,994)	+5%	54% (11.7)
Size					
Very small	45% (6.7)	+5%	\$33,989 (\$5,294) <sup>a</sup>	-1%	47% (8.8) <sup>a</sup>
Small	46% (17.7)	+6%	\$34,333 (\$4,121) <sup>a</sup>	0	53% (10.2) <sup>ab</sup>
Medium	48% (14.0)	+11%	\$37,829 (\$4,962) <sup>a</sup>	+10%	60% (7.4) <sup>b</sup>
Large	57% (17.6)	+31%	\$44,255 (\$5,386) <sup>b</sup>	+29%	67% (5.4) <sup>b</sup>
Region					
Northeast	56% (17.1) <sup>a</sup>	+29%	\$38,673 (\$6,100)	+13%	59% (11.1)
South	52% (14.0) <sup>ab</sup>	+19%	\$36,885 (\$7,084)	+8%	58% (12.6)
Midwest	54% (9.9) <sup>ab</sup>	+26%	\$39,042 (\$4,459)	+14%	62% (8.2)
West	41% (15.7) <sup>b</sup>	-5%	\$39,889 (\$7,683)	+16%	58% (9.9)

*Note.* Superscripts denote Tukey post hoc significant differences within size and region of schools.

An independent samples *t* test indicated that the public colleges in our sample graduate in-state students at the same rate as private colleges do; however graduates from public institutions earn significantly more 10 years after starting college than do graduates of the private colleges ( $p = .041$ ) and are significantly more likely to earn more than \$25,000—roughly what a high school graduate earns, according to the College Scorecard—6 years after starting college ( $p = .006$ ).

**Size.** A one-way ANOVA showed no differences in graduation rate by size; however, graduates from large institutions earn significantly more than graduates of schools of all other sizes (very small,  $p = .000$ ; small,  $p = .000$ ; medium,  $p = .002$ ). Graduates of very small colleges were significantly less likely to earn more than individuals with a high school diploma compared to graduates of medium ( $p = .001$ ) and large ( $p = .000$ ) schools, but not graduates of small schools. Graduates of large colleges were significantly more likely to earn more than individuals with a high school diploma than were graduates of schools in all other categories (small,  $p = .000$ ; medium,  $p = .001$ ).

**Region.** A one-way ANOVA showed only one difference in graduation rate by region: Colleges in the Northeast had a significantly higher graduation rate than did colleges in the West ( $p = .026$ ). No differences were found on salary items by region.

We asked faculty working in academic outdoor programs to respond to several questions about postgraduate employment. These included (a) the percentage of alumni working in full-time year-round positions, full-time seasonal positions, or part-time/itinerant positions for the first two to three years after graduating (shown in Table 6); (b) the percentage of graduates going to work in different jobs (shown in Table 8); and (c) estimations of job prospects for graduates over the next 10 years.

**Table 6***Percentages of Graduates' Employment Status 2–3 Years After Graduating*

Category	Full-time year-round	Full-time seasonal	Part-time or itinerant	Other
Overall	33% (23.9)	37% (23.3)	18% (16.0)	12% (29.6)
Public in-state	35% (25.4)	35% (24.3)	15% (12.1)	15% (32.2)
Private	30% (20.7)	41% (21.5)	23% (21.3)	7% (23.6)

No significant differences were found between public and private colleges in graduates' employment status 2–3 years after college. Several answers were provided for "other," including traveling ( $n = 1$ ), going to graduate school ( $n = 2$ ), and leaving the outdoor field ( $n = 2$ ).

As shown in Table 7, the highest percentage of programs report that *a lot* of their graduates enter wilderness trip programs and summer camps after graduation, followed by environmental education, team-building, and commercial recreation. Inverting the responses shows the kinds of jobs that outdoor program graduates are least likely to attain. The least common jobs—for which *none* was greater than *a lot*—were military programs (31%), college programs (15%), K–12 education (15%), and wilderness therapy (14%). "Other" reported job areas included land management ( $n = 4$ ), outdoor retail/gear/startup ( $n = 3$ ), graduate school ( $n = 2$ ), and wildlife rehabilitation ( $n = 1$ ).

**Table 7***Ranking of Kinds of Work Attained by Outdoor Programs Graduates*

Kinds of work/area	% of graduates entering workforce			
	A lot	Some	Only a few	None
Wilderness trip programs	27%	41%	19%	2%
Summer camps	25%	36%	17%	0%
Environmental education	19%	34%	32%	3%
Team-building programs	14%	44%	19%	12%
Commercial recreation	14%	37%	29%	9%
Unrelated fields	10%	49%	25%	3%
Community recreation	7%	42%	36%	5%
Wilderness therapy	7%	39%	31%	14%
K–12 education	7%	36%	29%	15%
Other	7%	12%	7%	0%
College programs	3%	25%	44%	15%
Military	0%	5%	48%	31%

Regarding employment prospects over the next 10 years, 54% ( $n = 29$ ) of respondents estimated jobs for their graduates would increase, 37% ( $n = 20$ ) estimated jobs would stay the same, and 9% ( $n = 5$ ) estimated jobs would decrease. Forecasts did not differ by region.

## Employers' Preferred Qualifications Compared to Program Responses

The sample of 134 employers responding to our survey included the following kinds of organizations (respondents could check more than one category): nonprofit outdoor (48%), wilderness expedition (22%), K-12 school (20%), commercial outdoor (16%), environmental education (15%), college program (8%), government (4%), and other (18%). The majority of organizations reported serving a variety of age ranges; the most served population was 12-18 years old (90%), with no organization exclusively serving populations over 22 years old. Of organizations, 38% reported working in a backcountry environment, 32% in rural environments, 14% in urban environments, 10% in suburban environments, and 7% other. Thus, although not exhaustive, the sample thus seems to fairly represent the kinds of organizations that would hire recent graduates into positions traditionally regarded as outdoor education and recreation jobs.

Respondents were asked to select from a list of qualifications and rate what they believed was minimal or ideal. Table 8 shows the percentage of programs selecting each item and the ranking.

**Table 8**  
*Ranking of Desired Entry-Level Qualifications: Employer Rankings*

Qualification	% selected	% ranking as minimum	% ranking as ideal
National-level certifications	87	30	57
Bachelor's degree in related field	80	27	53
High school diploma	68	23	7
Skill training from degree program	68	35	33
Master's degree in related field	61	6	55
Associate's degree in related field	51	25	28
Degree in an unrelated field	13	7	6

When asked to rate the top three most valuable skills when hiring a new employee, respondents greatly favored leadership skills (87%), certification and experience (85%), and an academic degree in outdoor education/recreation (43%) over managerial skills (27%) and a degree in other majors (18%). These ratings are also reflected in what employers regard as the most valuable leadership skills, with the three most valuable being ability to manage risk (84%), effective oral communication (62%), and competence with technical skills (45%). The three lowest ranked leadership skills were versatility with leadership styles (28%), cross-cultural competency (27%), and environmental stewardship (9%). Finally, when asked to rate the most valuable managerial skills for new employees, respondents greatly favored logistics (90%), creating written support materials (71%), and equipment management (62%) over budgeting (22%), social media skills (18%), and creating written marketing materials (9%).

Academic program faculty were asked to select favored qualifications and estimate their value to employers in top-three order. Table 9 shows the most selected qualifications and the order of their presumed value.

**Table 9***Ranking of Desired Entry-Level Qualifications: Faculty Estimations*

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Number selecting</b>	<b>Most valuable</b>	<b>Second most</b>	<b>Third most</b>
Leadership skills	47	42%	20%	17%
Technical skills and certifications	41	10%	42%	15%
Major in area	36	22%	22%	17%
Other	18	9%	7%	15%
Experience	11	11%	11%	39%
Environmental aptitude	2	6%	6%	0
Managerial skills	11	7%	5%	7%
Aptitude with equipment	7	2%	2%	9%
Major in other area	5	5%	3%	0%
Personal characteristics	2	6%	0	6%

## Discussion

This study was the first to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the current value of a degree from an academic outdoor program at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States and to examine degree value in the context of job estimates and employer-preferred skills. It used information from currently available sources that potential students are likely to access and perceptions of program faculty. It also organized institutions across relevant categories so individual programs can better understand their position in relation to comparators. Finally, it queried employers that are most likely to hire graduates from programs such as the ones represented in the sample, in an effort to assess alignment between market needs and candidate skills. In this discussion, we will focus on major themes that emerged from the analysis and provide our own estimation of degree value in the current outdoor education marketplace. Although the study was largely descriptive in nature, it gives important information for program faculty and potential students alike.

The number of 4-year institutions identified as having academic outdoor programs—96—is the highest number reported to date. This suggests that outdoor pursuits remain popular and are still perceived by institutions as worthy of baccalaureate degree status. Programs were fairly evenly distributed around the United States, with greater concentrations in the Northeast and West. The majority of programs are at public universities, and most of these (88%) are medium or large in size, whereas a greater number of the private schools offering programs are small or very small (89%). Notably, with 70% of colleges in the United States being private colleges (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010), the concentration of outdoor degree programs is heavily skewed toward public universities. This reflects the location of Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT)-accredited college programs; 91% of the COAPRT programs are at public colleges and universities. Though surveys were not distributed to all COAPRT programs, many of the schools in this study happen to be accredited.

In this study, 11 of the 12 schools in the Midwest were public and 15 of the 18 schools in the West were public; in the Northeast and South, the schools were fairly equally split between public and private. This suggests that some regions present greater variety to potential students than others do, in terms of what the campus experience is going to be like while enrolled.

The preponderance of public institutions in the West and Midwest also helps us to understand the cost differences in those regions as compared to others. Very small schools in this sample tended to be private, so it is unsurprising that they were significantly more expensive than their public counterparts, particularly because the basis for cost in this analysis was the in-state tuition rate; that said, on the whole, medium-sized schools were less expensive than any other size institution at every level of expected family contribution. All else equal, then, medium-sized institutions in the Midwest appear to be a cost-effective option for in-state students when available, compared with private or even public options elsewhere.

Federal aid and student loan debt comparisons followed similar patterns. One might assume that private schools would be out of reach for many students compared with their in-state public option. But the net cost of private schools in our sample was only 13% more than in-state public options and could therefore be attractive to students (a) willing to spend more for a smaller school experience or (b) who lack viable in-state options. Students selecting private colleges for their outdoor degree when a public option is available should expect to amass more debt and pay a higher amount each month toward their loans; this is true for every region except the Northeast, where students attending private colleges amass 5% less debt than do those attending public universities even though the annual net cost and sticker price is higher. Again, readers are reminded that our calculations were based on the College Scorecard, which reflects only federal loans and therefore will likely differ from the real-world comparisons of aid packages applicants will find themselves reviewing.

The salary comparisons we presented should be interpreted cautiously. The annual income figures we included were based on salaries across all disciplines and professions at the institutions presented in aggregate on the College Scorecard. Graduates with a degree in outdoor education or recreation might earn more or less than what was reported here. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that the figures are fairly applicable to these fields. For example, the average annual salary for schools in our sample ranged from the low \$30,000s to the mid-\$40,000s for graduates 10 years after starting college. Given the figures reported in the literature (Hodge et al., 2012) and available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this seems a fair estimation of outdoor education and recreation careers. In addition, the percentage of graduates earning more than someone with a high school diploma (approximately \$25,000) 6 years after starting college—or 2 years after graduation from a 4-year program—could also be seen as fairly representing a field with a median starting salary of \$22,000, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Looking at the figures in Table 5, public universities seem to offer greater earning potential than do their private counterparts, and again, public schools in the Midwest compare favorably against other schools and categories in the sample.

Postgraduate employment figures provided by faculty fit within this overall logic. The data show that one third of program graduates acquire full-time year-round positions upon graduation, with another third in full-time seasonal jobs and the final third split between part-time or itinerant work and other postgraduate options. A slightly higher percentage of graduates of public institutions work in full-time year-round positions compared to graduates of private colleges. For students paying back loans, this could be an important consideration, particularly if they are trying to heed the advice of some observers who recommend keeping monthly loan payments below 10% of monthly income or only taking loans equal to expected starting salary (Clark, 2009). As reported, the average monthly payment for graduates of schools in our sample was \$243, which would require an annual salary of \$29,160. These figures suggest that graduates who need loans should anticipate having to keep other expenses to a minimum for the first few years of their career or finding supplemental sources of income. Longitudinal research on program alumni would be useful for understanding how many people stay in or leave the field and for what reasons.

Responses from faculty about where graduates are working and the skills they believe are necessary for success indicate that students are finding work in their field and the skills they learned in college align with the qualifications employers value. Additionally, faculty job estimations are consistent with federal and industry forecasts, which predict an increase in outdoor jobs over the next decade. Therefore, outdoor program graduates for at least the next decade should expect to find work that matches with their training and lifestyle interests. Faculty should consider sharing this information with prospective students, along with a realistic estimation of salary projections.

Finally, a focus only on cost, salary, and employment figures may obscure the intangible benefits of pursuing a degree in outdoor education or recreation that might attract students to those majors. Majoring in something a student finds satisfying may enrich the college experience or even maintain the student's interest in school. Working in the outdoor field after graduating can also fit with lifestyle interests, with some jobs offering week-on/week-off schedules or seasonal employment that allows geographic mobility. Summer camps, trip programs, and some resort jobs often provide housing, which not only cuts expenses but also offers a communal living experience that might appeal to certain young people. Additionally, the chance to travel to remote and exotic locations for work or having long blocks of time off for personal recreation is also appealing to many emerging adults who have spent 16 years in formal schooling and have the privilege of using the postgraduate period to explore their identities (Arnett, 2007). Last, possessing a baccalaureate degree alone enhances lifetime earnings by 66% over a high school diploma and 34% over an associate's degree (Baum, Ma, & Payee, 2013), and the characteristics of a liberal arts education are also reported to be desired by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2013). These important factors might not be immediately apparent to individuals and families trying to assess degree value using figures from the College Scorecard.

## Conclusion

The outdoor education and recreation sectors are likely to present robust employment opportunities to emerging professionals over the next decade, when they can expect modest starting salaries but greater earning potential as their career advances in the field. Academic outdoor programs, like many other areas in higher education, presently operate in an increasingly competitive marketplace in which potential students have access to unprecedented information to guide their selection decisions. This will likely involve a rising awareness of debt and earnings projections, factors that could influence young people's decisions to major in outdoor education or recreation. Programs can use the figures and observations presented in this article to guide strategic planning and devise ways to communicate the value of their degree to potential students and their families, while also developing ways to maintain their relevance and desirability.

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