

# **College Student Experiences on Diversity-Focused Outdoor Adventure Trips**

**Nathan Williams**

Department of Wellness and Recreation,  
North Carolina State University

Higher education institutions have implemented a number of campus diversity interventions to increase student awareness and knowledge of diversity. Examples of these interventions include intergroup dialogue courses, diversity workshops and multicultural programs, service learning, and incoming student diversity requirements (Bowman et al., 2016; Hudson, 2018; Hurtado et al., 1998; Jayakumar, 2008, 2015). Despite these interventions, racial and cultural unrest on campuses has been highlighted by recent large-scale student protests (New, 2014; Phillips, 2018; Spencer & Stolberg, 2017; Trachtenberg, 2018) and by an increase in reports of campus hate crimes (Bauman, 2018). Although a number of these diversity strategies have been studied, there is a dearth of research into how these programs and institutional efforts are shaping the diversity experiences of college students from a qualitative lens. There is also a lack of research into diversity interventions that utilize experiential education pedagogies outside of the classroom setting. Some institutions have begun offering diversity-focused outdoor adventure trips. These types of trips take a small participant group, representing a diversity of student backgrounds and campus populations (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, type of campus involvement), on an outdoor recreation trip that includes diversity curriculum and discussions. Despite the potential for these programs to affect diversity learning outcomes, there is little research into them and participating students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of college student participant experiences on diversity-focused outdoor adventure trips. The primary research question for this study was, What are the diversity experiences of college students who participate in a diversity-focused college outdoor adventure trip?

We used two theoretical frameworks to bridge the campus diversity literature and the field of college outdoor adventure: Kolb's (1984, 2015) theory of experiential learning and Gurin et al.'s (2002) theory of campus diversity experiences. Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, 2015) posits that individuals do not automatically learn from their direct experiences such as a diversity-focused outdoor trip. Rather, following the experience, individuals must have an opportunity to reflect on it. This reflection could be initiated through group discussions, journaling, or course assignments, for example. This reflective observation may then lead to abstract conceptualization, where the learner recognizes that what they learned from the experience can apply in other contexts. Last, the individual may use this learning to undertake active experimentation with their new knowledge (i.e., they use the knowledge they have gained from experiences).

The theory of campus diversity experiences (Gurin et al., 2002) provides a framework that tells where the program in question fits within participants' overall experiences with diversity programming and informal experiences with diversity. If a participant has a rich background

of contact with diverse peers and multicultural programs before the program, they may have a decidedly different perspective on the experiences of the program than someone for whom this was an entirely novel experience.

## Method

The program under study has operated for 7 years at a large, research-focused, public university in the Southeastern United States, with one trip held during each spring break for 8 to 9 days. The program has taken 10 to 12 students backpacking in Western North Carolina (Years 1 to 3), canoeing in the Florida Everglades (Year 4), or canoeing on the Louisiana Gulf Coast (Years 5 to 7). Each year of the trip, the trip group has included a diversity of racial and ethnic identities, genders, academic focuses, and geographic backgrounds. The experience of previous program participants was investigated through semistructured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From a total population of 72 previous participants, 24 individuals participated in interviews lasting 30 to 60 min with an interview protocol of nine questions informed by both previously mentioned theoretical frameworks. Questions addressed participant experiences on the trip, in addition to their reflection on it and their other diversity-related experiences in college.

Interview data analysis followed the Corbin and Strauss (2008) approach to reading interviews, coding them to find concepts, identifying broad categories or themes, and finally looking for looking among the data for axial codes that indicate relationships and patterns. Throughout each of these steps, I engaged in writing memos to develop a dialogue with the data and also to assess the extent to which my own personal experience with outdoor adventure and diversity might influence my analysis of participant and trip leader experiences (Jones et al., 2013). I have facilitated this trip for the past 4 years of its operation and have previous experiences with other diversity and outdoor programs.

## Results

Primary themes from participant interviews were participants attending the trip to try something new (the majority of participants interviewed had little or no prior outdoor experience), participants engaging in informal discussions and making personal connections to others in their group in nonfacilitated settings (i.e., over meals, in the van, in tents at night) but less so during facilitated diversity curriculum and discussion, and participants gaining an appreciation for the outdoors despite challenges of discomfort or adverse weather. The theme of meeting peers whom participants would not have normally engaged with in college life was significant. One participant remembered about their trip experience,

I really enjoyed, like, meeting the people that were on that trip. It's probably one of those things where you would have never talked to those people unless they were on the trip with you. So I loved being exposed to people I would never see because, like, you don't usually roll with people that I guess are in the same mindset as you.

## Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on campus diversity experiences and outdoor adventure practice by revealing how college students experience outdoor adventure diversity programs, both informally and as part of facilitated activities and curriculum. Findings from this study support the opportunities presented by diversity-focused trips and activities in an outdoor setting. In remembering a final activity, one participant recalled,

We were walking along the water, I'm not sure exactly which city we were in. But that final reflection that we had . . . I just remember the feeling that I have it was such a sense of serenity, but also connection with a group of people that I never would have interacted with [at the university].

This speaks to the pathway of diversity education that students can experience in campus diversity programs (Gurin et al., 2002) that support developing connections with diverse peers.

Themes of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, 2015) were present in participant reflections as well. According to one participant, the trip made them “more aware that not everyone has grown up the same way that I have and that not everyone has had the same experiences. And so I remember, when I was back at home, I just assumed that, you know, everyone had college educated parents and was going to go to college and study this and that. And then now it's something that I don't immediately assume, and I don't immediately assume that people have, you know, the quote, unquote, I guess, nuclear family. And so I'm just a lot more aware of, of how I approach people and make assumptions about them as well.” Future research should explore how facilitator and administrators intended outcomes for these programs addressed, or did not address participant outcomes, given the importance participants placed on informal (i.e., non-facilitated) experiences.

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