

Outdoor Orientation Leaders: The Effects of Peer Leadership

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated how student (peer) leaders of college outdoor orientation programs understand the effects of their leadership experience on personal growth and development. We collected data through in-depth interviews of 36 first-time student leaders at four colleges. Findings indicate that the majority of students at all four colleges placed high value on their leadership experiences. Students reported that the experience led to positive changes. The experiences of the leaders are explained in a four-stage model. Student leaders believe the outdoor leadership experience increased confidence to face adversity, increased confidence in exercising one's voice appropriately, and increased leadership self-efficacy. Students also reported a positive change in interpersonal growth, describing a better ability to work well with others and facilitate social situations. Within faith-based programs, leaders also reported significant spiritual growth.

KEYWORDS: outdoor orientation; leadership development; student development; outdoor education; outdoor leadership; self-efficacy

Outdoor orientation programs use adventure experiences to assist students in transitioning to college. Students join small groups (fewer than 15 individuals) and spend at least 1 night camping away from campus (Bell, Gass, Nafiger, & Starbuck, 2014). Outdoor orientation programs are common at many institutions of higher education in America, including all the Ivy League colleges and universities such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and Penn State (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010).

Census research analyzing all outdoor orientation programs in 2006 and 2012 indicates that program numbers are growing on college campuses, private schools, and graduate schools (Bell et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2010). These programs are known primarily for helping first-year students transition to college, but in this paper we explore a secondary benefit: aiding the development of student leaders. Leadership development is core to the mission of higher education institutions, and experience with outdoor orientation leadership training may effectively meet these developmental goals. In this study, we interviewed student leaders to understand the aspects of a leadership experience that they perceive as important in their development.

Literature Review

Research on outdoor orientation programs demonstrates positive impacts on participants. To date, more than 25 peer-reviewed published studies and 11 doctoral dissertations have explored benefits to trip participants (Bell et al., 2014). Outdoor orientation experiences have been shown to improve academic success (Bell & Holmes, 2011; Gass, 1987; Lechner, 1976; Stogner, 1978; Sullivan, Sprunger, & Williams, 1971); retention (Brown, 1996; Gass, 1987, 1990; Gilbert, 1984; Oravec, 2002); extracurricular involvement (Gilbert, 1984; Sullivan et al., 1971); successful adjustment to college (Brown, 1996; Gass, 1987; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2007); social support (Austin, Martin, Mittelstaedt, Schanning, & Ogle, 2009; Bell, 2005; Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003; Wolfe & Kay, 2007); community development (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009); sense of place (Austin et al., 2009); self-concept (Wetzel, 1978; Wolfe & Kay, 2007); self-satisfaction (Stogner, 1978); self-confidence (Oravec, 2002); tolerance (Gass, 1987; Hansen, 1982); interdependence (Hansen, 1982); and spiritual development (Bobilya et al., 2009). The research has focused on the impacts to participants. Prior to this study, Fields (2010) conducted the only other formal research study on peer leaders of outdoor orientation programs: a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study (Creswell, 2009). Fields' sample consisted of 15 students who completed the following quantitative pre- and posttest instruments: the Outdoor Recreation Self-Efficacy (ORSE) scale (Mittelstaedt & Jones, 2009) and the Leadership Self-Efficacy scale (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Students were also given an opportunity to respond to the following open-ended question: "Please write any additional comments regarding your leadership, experiences, or application of learned ideas below or on back." Five students were selected to participate in an interview as well, with the primary goal of investigating reasons for leading a trip and ways in which the experience affected their leadership self-efficacy. Themes of *fun*, *rewarding*, *challenging*, and *empowering* emerged from the interviews. Fields concluded that students' training and leadership experience increase leadership self-efficacy. Qualitative interview data confirmed the findings from the ORSE scale. The purpose of our study is to further explore the benefits to the peer leaders.

Research on Peer Leadership in Higher Education Literature

Research in higher education suggests peer influence is important to the college student experience: "When peer interactions involve educational or intellectual activities or topics, the effects are almost always beneficial to students" (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999, p. 617). Astin (1993) argued, "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). Many researchers agree that

students are positively influenced by “successful” upper-class peers (Astin, 1993; Cuseo, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Although students report personal benefits from serving their peers (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), accepting a mentoring role also involves risk, such as the negative reactions to the authority of the mentors. “Risks, power, and resistance were acknowledged but benefits were recognized much more frequently by all participants” (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 130).

A benefit recognized in the peer mentor literature is cognitive growth, fostered by the processes of simplification, clarification, and exemplification (Topping, 1996, p. 324). As students teach content to their fellow students, learning is often enhanced for both parties. In her presentation of a typology for higher education peer mentor programs, Topping (1996) references a study by Annis. Randomly selected student groups were asked to read a selection of text. The first group was asked to read for comprehension only, the second group was asked to read in order to prepare to teach to a peer, and the third group was asked to read for teaching and carried out the teaching to a peer. “The ‘read only’ group gained less than the ‘read to teach’ group, which in turn gained less than the ‘read and teach’ group. The tutors gained more than the tutees” (p. 324). Peer leadership includes social benefits (Colvin, 2007), developmental benefits (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), and academic benefits (Topping, 1996).

Kuh (1995) set out to “identify the out-of-class experiences seniors associated with their learning” (p. 124). Examining 149 students from 12 universities, he concluded benefits were derived from even the most general involvement in extracurricular activities on campus, but *especially* in leadership roles. Students reported gains in critical thinking, relational skills, and organizational skills acquired from out-of-class experiences that are also “highly correlated with satisfaction and success after college” (p. 150). When students experientially engage in leadership roles among their peers, such experience may have an especially powerful impact because they are introduced at a developmentally appropriate time.

Stage–Environment Fit

Stage–environment fit theory assumes that “if changes in *needs* are aligned with changes in *opportunities* at a certain stage of life, positive outcomes will result” (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002, p. 110). This theory has been used to explain and predict positive outcomes within middle school contexts (Midgley, 2002). Findings from previous studies suggest that “some of the negative changes associated with adolescent development result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by their social environments” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). For example, despite students’ increasing needs for peer and student–teacher relationships in middle school, the context often provides “less perceived social support and more of an emphasis on grades and competition” (Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1997).

Analyzing the higher education environment from this theoretical perspective may offer insights to how students succeed in college. If students are seeking leadership opportunities with increased responsibility, but not afforded these opportunities, the mismatch in stage (needing autonomy) and environment (restricted from autonomy) could result in frustration and a lack of meeting developmental goals; conversely, if students are seeking leadership opportunities and are afforded responsibilities matching their developmental stage, students would be expected to have successful experiences. We wonder if students’ involvement in a wilderness leadership experience would suggest a stage–environment fit. Would aspects of the trip leadership environment align with students’ developmental needs?

A further question for this study was whether students would report different experiences as peer leaders in a faith-based institution. Faith-based outdoor orientation programs, although similar to outdoor orientation programs at secular institutions, add the goal of fostering spiritual development to the leaders’ responsibilities.

Our questions for this study are as follows:

- How do peer leaders of college outdoor orientation programs perceive the value and effects of their training and experience?
- If leaders perceive the experience led to personal growth or change, to which aspects of the experience do trip leaders attribute these changes?
- Do trip leaders perceive something *about* leading outdoor orientation trips that induces these changes?
- Finally, are there differences between faith-based programs and programs without a particular spiritual orientation?

Method and Research Tradition

Setting

We conducted this study at four outdoor orientation programs at private colleges and universities. Data collection occurred on campus at these institutions and at outdoor program sites. Two of the institutions are evangelical Christian colleges and have membership in both the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities and the more selective Christian College Consortium. Of the other two schools, one is an Ivy League university and one is a prestigious private college. All four institutions have reputations for academic excellence and are highly selective.

As of the 2012 census, there are 185 confirmed outdoor orientation programs operating at colleges and universities in the United States and three programs in Canada (Bell & Starbuck, 2012). The process for selecting programs to participate in this study involved the following two considerations. First, we sought well-established programs. Of the 185 programs in existence, 115 were developed since the 2006 census. The four programs in this study were chosen from the pool of established programs and have been operating for over 30 years. Second, we sought programs that were led by college student leaders trained in a program of leadership development. This is the most common model for trip-leader training. Some well-established programs employ unique student leadership development models; they were not included in this study.

Sample

Thirty-six new (first-time) student peer leaders, 16 male and 20 female, from four institutions were interviewed. A minimum of eight students were interviewed from each program to seek diverse opinions. Participants were recruited by an e-mail and verbal invitation from the outdoor orientation program director at each institution. Peer leaders' class designations ranged from sophomore to senior. To minimize maturity threats, we interviewed first-time leaders instead of leaders who had led for multiple years. Both written and recorded verbal consent were given before data collection, and students who expressed verbal or nonverbal hesitancy to answer any question were reminded of their ability to decline response. Pseudonyms were used in place of the actual names of the student leaders who participated in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection procedures utilized a posttrip response essay and an in-depth posttrip interview. Student leaders wrote their posttrip response essays immediately after their trip ended, and the only prompt given was, "Describe your leadership experience." The question was purposely open-ended and neutral. Data were gathered between August 2012 and January 2013.

Thirty-six semistructured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) were conducted in person during the Fall 2012 semester. Students were interviewed on campus at their school and interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The time frame of 2 to 4 months was chosen to provide reflection opportunities and life experiences after a student's outdoor orientation leadership

role. The first author transcribed the interviews. Given the findings from Fields (2010), leadership self-efficacy was of interest for the current study. Therefore, we designed the questionnaire to specifically avoid leading questions in this domain (Seidman, 2006). Findings were drawn from broad, open-ended questions that strengthen the validity of the data.

Coding

First cycle. The first author coded essays and interviews using a holistic process as described by Saldana (2009), coding paragraphs and text according to their conceptual essence. Moustakas (1994) provided a framework for data analysis in (a) identifying significant statements, (b) creating meaning units, (c) clustering themes, (d) advancing textual and structural distinctions, and (e) making a composite/exhaustive description of the structure of the experience. We used Nvivo coding software to help create the meaning units and cluster themes. Occasionally, codes would overlap, and the same section may have been coded (or partially coded) to multiple themes. Discussions between the authors about the codes helped to advance the structural distinctions. Primarily the first author conducted coding, with triangulation and consistency support from members of his doctoral committee.

Second cycle. The process of coding qualitative interviews is cyclical. “Data are not coded—they’re *re-coded*” (Saldana, 2009, p. 45). As codes were created, refined, deleted, and re-created, data from previously coded transcripts were revised and re-coded to advance the structural distinctions properly. During the second cycle of coding, data were coded within nodes. For example, within the “Responsibility” node, additional analysis was needed to determine what students felt responsible for and what that responsibility meant to them. Connections between nodes and a general synthesis of the data as related to the research questions began to emerge during this process, helping to create a description of the structure of the leadership experience based upon themes.

Program Overviews

Information to help us contextualize the programs was gathered from formal and informal interviews with program directors, program brochures and leader training manuals, program websites, and marketing brochures. Additionally, data generated from the 2012 Outdoor Orientation Program Census (Bell & Starbuck, 2012) were used to analyze program similarities and differences. In this study, the programs are coded as A, B, C, and D. Programs A and B are faith based, rooted in an evangelical Christian worldview. Programs C and D are not faith based. Because one of the criteria used in program selection was a commonly utilized model for trip-leader training and coleadership experiences, the four programs included in this study inevitably shared many commonalities. All incorporate common trip elements such as facilitated ropes course experiences, structured first-year experience conversations facilitated by upper-class student leaders, and the guided sharing of one’s personal life narrative or life story. All require a minimum of wilderness first aid training. All programs share common goals of preparing students for social success in college, helping students to establish a sense of personal identity, and improving the campus community or culture. Table 1 highlights primary programmatic differences including date of origin, faith basis, length of trips, size of program, faculty involvement, and minimum first aid training.

Table 1*Program Overviews by Key Components*

Program	Year founded	Faith based?	Trip length in days	Estimated number of participants	Faculty directly involved?	Minimum first aid training
A	1970	Yes	12	300	No	WAFA
B	1969	Yes	17	215	Yes	WFR
C	1984	No	4 or 6	430	No	WFA
D	1984	No	8	220	No	WFA

Results

Stage 1: Students Entrusted to Lead an Experience They Value

Students indicated the importance of their own trip and wanting to provide similar experiences for incoming students:

I think just that there is a moment when you're leading where it all clicks, where you say that this program works . . . You realize sort of the deep underlying methods of this. Above all of the fun and silly games and above all the sort of enjoyment that we apply to this and all the silly things, you realize that *deep down this is an extremely important situation.* (Nate)

Many indicated their perception of the importance of the trip in their lives and a subsequent desire to "pay it forward" by providing a similar meaningful experience for other students: "I wanted to be a part of helping others have the same experience that I had" (Jill). "I saw where I was as a freshman and I saw what [the program] did for me as freshman, [and] I thought it would be great if other people could have this experience too" (Daniel).

Student leaders believe their role in the program is meaningful and holds potential to affect incoming students in significant ways. Students indicated that the level of responsibility they accepted increased their perception of the importance of their role: "You feel the weight of responsibility slowly coming down on your shoulders, and you're like, 'Okay, this is big'" (Jon). Maria expressed that the responsibility of leading a trip had changed her "because in the past it had always been that I had not had a lot of responsibility . . . but [now] it was just me and my co, we're out in the wilderness, so it was kind of like our decisions reigned at the end of the day."

Within all four programs, student leaders reported in their interviews as feeling responsible for the safety, logistics, positive experience, bonding, and successful college transition of their participants. Within the faith-based programs, students also felt responsible for the spiritual growth of their participants. Throughout many of these encounters, students mentioned this being the first time (or one of the first times) they felt entrusted with this much responsibility.

Stage 2: Students Question Their Competence

With the responsibility of a new leadership experience on their shoulders, students reported feeling nervous and apprehensive about their ability to competently lead. Nervousness before the outdoor orientation trip was one of the most consistent themes of the study, appearing in 34 of the 36 interviews. Excitement was also mentioned frequently, usually paired with the nervousness theme. Students were primarily concerned about appearing incompetent. In addition, the weight of multifaceted responsibility also caused feelings of inadequacy. Leaders had a high regard for the potential benefits of the trip and a desire to create a positive experience for themselves and their participants.

I was definitely nervous, just because I put so much value on the trip. I felt like if it was anything else—I know I can lead these kids and they won't die, but I was really nervous because I wanted to do a really good job making their first week at [college] really great and it actually has such a huge impact on their whole next four years. I know I'm friends with a lot of people on my trip. I did feel nervous because of the responsibility that I knew I was going to have. I was definitely excited to do it. (Tim)

Tim connects his feelings of nervousness, excitement, and desire to provide a positive experience for students with the potential and importance of the outdoor orientation program trip. He was nervous about supporting them and providing them with the opportunity to thrive over the next four years. He believes his role in shaping "their first week" at college is important and worthwhile. Another student from a different institution echoed this sentiment as well:

I guess I wasn't scared for anything in terms of sort of survival or any outdoor things, first aid. I wasn't really scared about anything like that. I think I just felt some pressure to make sure that this was a good experience for them, knowing that they were all in a vulnerable spot, having literally just left home . . . there's just this sense that you're going to have this really deep, emotional, profound experience out in the woods with these people, and some of them might become your best friends. I just wanted to make sure that I was able to facilitate that, so I was worried. (Rob)

Later in the interview, Rob elaborated on this idea further, stating that there is a "legacy of it being a really successful program. People really do meet their best friends for the rest of college and make really meaningful relationships." Furthermore, he also believes the culture at his highly selective university heightens the importance of "getting started on the right foot."

Student leaders did not speak about desiring to appear competent as often as they spoke about their fear of appearing incompetent: "I was nervous, like very nervous . . . just realizing 'I have never done this before. I'm going to be leading my peers and if I don't know what I'm doing, it's going to be pretty obvious'" (Amanda). "I think, just not wanting to seem incompetent. I think that was what it was" (Jessica).

Stage 3: Projecting and Internalizing Competence

Projecting competence. Students placed in the leadership role were trained, but did not feel ready for the multifaceted levels of responsibility. So they regularly mentioned feeling the need to appear as though they know what they are doing. Joy laughed while recalling her participant experience, after leading her first trip: "It's hilarious in hindsight because as a [participant] I was like 'Our leaders totally know what they're doing and they've probably done this dozens of times before and I'm sure they're really confident.' I had NO idea!"

After leading, Joy realized her participants placed the same level of trust and confidence in her that she had placed in her trip leaders only a year prior. However, she also recognized limits to her knowledge, training, and ability of which participants were not aware.

Rather than presenting an image of uncertainty, leaders often perceived the need to pretend to have the situation under control: "People are looking at you and you have to act like you know what you're doing. There'd be times where me [*sic*] and my co-leader were just not sure what was going on. You act like you know what's going on and you stay composed and it's fine" (Grace).

Students recounted instances of projecting an image of competence even if they did not feel competent or aware of their next decision:

When I was on my own trip I looked up to my leaders as 'Oh, these guys know exactly what they're doing. They're in complete control.' Then being in my own situation I tried to make it appear like I was in control—and I think I was for the most part—but there were times when I was unsure . . . a part of leadership is bluffing, to be perfectly honest." (Tim)

Being acknowledged as the leader and recognizing that participants accept them in the same way that the current leaders remember accepting their outdoor orientation program leaders began to build confidence in student leaders—the assurance to have the ability to “deal with things” (Ross). Student leaders are thrust into a role they perceive to be very important. They regularly mentioned feeling the need to project an image that they know what they are doing.

Internalizing competence. At some point during the leadership experience, students felt a shift toward internalizing competence and realizing they have the ability to lead in ways they did not previously recognize. Students cited three major reasons their anxiety dissipated: participant excitement, entering the backcountry, and a legitimizing experience that created a sense of accomplishment.

Participant excitement. A major reason often cited for the absence of nervousness was the excitement student leaders recognized in their participants. Once the students arrived and the experience began, the energy of the participants helped student leaders embrace their new leadership role: “Just meeting them and realizing they were really excited and they were capable and just really into the community already and just pretty stoked on being there took away a lot of my nervousness” (Beth). This excitement of incoming participants fueled the leaders’ confidence to move beyond initial feelings of nervousness and “jump right in” to the leadership role.

Entering the backcountry. Most students remembered their nervousness disappearing as soon as they began backcountry travel: “I’ve got to tell you, like the minute we were in the woods, it just all melted away” (Warren). Warren reiterated the drastic difference in his emotive state between the anxiety-filled hours leading up to the trip and the almost instantaneous shift once hiking began. Others described similar experiences: “Once you actually get on the trail, everyone’s fine, you’re hiking, you set up camp and that’s fun. Every step of the way it gets easier and easier” (Evelyn).

Legitimizing experience. Some students recalled a specific turning point during the experience when they felt a sense of achievement that caused the feelings of nervousness to vanish. For some, this event was as small as being asked a simple question they were able to answer or successfully doing something technical, such as lighting the Whisperlite stove or showing the group how to read the map. These small but important expressions of competence were helpful for the leaders to feel legitimate in their roles. One woman reported,

Definitely the first day and a half that we were out in the woods I was pretty much directing everything toward my co-leader. . . . I’d say “I don’t know, I don’t know, ask him.” I did not realize most of the time a lot of the leaders make up stuff [laughing]. . . . by the end of the first day I was upset, I had established that standard, I felt inadequate but Jacob, being a great co-leader . . . said “you take the map tomorrow. You’re going to navigate.” I always told him that was the worst of my skills . . . he [said,] “I know you can do this. You’ve had training. You’re fine.” By the second night people were coming at me [to ask] “should we get the pots of water on now?” and everything felt a lot more at ease. I felt a lot more confident. (Lucy)

Positive support and feedback from peers regarding their first leadership acts was an important vehicle for realizing success. Evaluations after the experience were important, and the fact that her peers accepted and praised her after experiencing her leadership changed her understanding of her own potential. She then saw herself as a capable, competent leader who is comfortable in that role.

Other students made the connection between their newly discovered leadership competence and situations beyond the outdoor orientation leadership context:

I remember the feeling and know the feeling and that’s kind of stuck with me of just kind of knowing I can do . . . I can be this leader that other people recognize and that I can successfully lead a group in the Adirondacks and I’ll know what to do in a lot of different situations. (Ross)

Students described moving from *overwhelmed and incompetent* to feeling *capable and proud* of their accomplishments and abilities. Many students became “comfortable” in the leadership role, and the personal competence projected at the beginning of the trip was internalized before the trip ended.

Stage 4: Increased Confidence, Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Skills, and Spiritual Growth

After the trip, outdoor orientation program leaders reported a significant positive shift in their leadership, confidence, and interpersonal ability. Student leaders of faith-based programs also reported experiencing spiritual growth and witnessing spiritual growth in their participants.

Increased confidence. Increased confidence was the most cited change student leaders attributed to their leadership experience, mentioned by all students interviewed in this study. Ross said, “It was just a general confidence booster to have a group of six kids and lead them through the Adirondacks for a few days.” Individual definitions of the confidence construct varied, and perceptions about why confidence increased were nuanced. Three themes emerged as students described their conceptual understanding of confidence: transfer of achieved competence, learning to have a voice, and leadership self-efficacy.

Transfer of achieved competence. Students believed that confidence gained from trip leadership transferred to contexts beyond their outdoor orientation leadership roles. After overcoming the perceived challenges of the trip, students felt better equipped to face adversity outside of the trip: “I think it lends itself to a certain self-confidence in other situations. It seems like this is kind of a real experience as opposed to a lot of other things which are kind of fake and like you can handle real experiences” (Matt). Matt did not believe he had experienced similar levels of autonomy and responsibility before or since his outdoor orientation leadership experience.

A sophomore student who described coming into the outdoor orientation leadership experience after a difficult first year shared a similar realization:

The hugest thing for me was that it brought out a lot of self-confidence. I really struggled in certain areas my freshman year and I really wasn't feeling confident by the end of the year. Being able to be on trip and do really hard things and kind of prove to myself, I can actually do this. I can handle these intense situations and do it really well. That was really important, I got a lot of confidence in me that's definitely going to carry over. (Amanda)

Achieving perceived success within the outdoor orientation leadership role promoted confidence for future challenges. Amanda left the experience feeling capable of fulfilling the requirements of the specific leadership role and believed this success would help in future situations:

I think the thing that's been the most important is again just that confidence that I've come back with and the feeling like yeah, I can do hard things. I can face what is coming. Just that I have what it takes. I think this summer was really good in teaching me those things.

Developing a voice. Leaders described their experience as a catalyst for the realization of personal value or developing a personal voice: “I define confidence as more of an assurance of value, or I guess a belief that you have value and what you do has value. Just that you have abilities that are worthwhile” (Lydia). The leadership role provided the experience of others accepting their thoughts and ideas as valuable:

I really wrestled with my confidence of leadership . . . just believing that people really want to be led by what I have to say and who I am as a leader . . . I think this summer really taught me, people are interested in learning from me and what I have to offer. I think that's given me a lot of voice as a peer leader but even just in the relationships

with my friends, being able to have more confidence and saying, "Hey, yeah this is what I think." People do, they want to hear what I have to say. I didn't believe that about myself before necessarily. (Amanda)

The experience of leading affected Amanda's level of confidence beyond the trip: "In the past I would always be so willing to listen to people but not really have much to say. I feel like just not feeling like, wow, I really want to listen to you but if you ask me what I think, I feel like what I have to say is solid" (Amanda). After the experience, the peer leaders increased their willingness to share ideas with friends, classmates, and professors once returning to campus.

The development of a voice led to a willingness to speak up and take social risks in the classroom:

I'm definitely a person who doesn't talk as much in groups, especially in situations where I'm just out of my comfort zone, not really knowing people as well. I feel like I've been able to speak up more and I guess just take risks relationally, putting myself out there more. (Brian)

Students connected this outcome to their conception of confidence: "Just having that confidence, I've seen myself speak out more" (Evelyn). After their leadership experience, students said they were more likely to express opinions and exercise their "voice" in social groups. This change was typically described as a continuum, and not a definitive change:

I still am to some extent that kid that is not going to raise his hand, just not volunteer. Probably when I should either say, "That doesn't make sense" or "I know the answer" or "I disagree." But now I am much more likely to be that kid . . . It's good, because I'm more likely to stand up for myself basically. (Scott)

Classroom involvement, general social interactions, and potential future job interviews were a few examples of social arenas where Scott feels he will be more capable of presenting himself accurately. Two students mentioned increased willingness to approach professors. Specifically, Scott reported,

I'm much more willing to just go up to a professor and say, "Hey, I don't understand this. I need help with this." Or I'm much more willing to raise my hand in class and say, "I don't get it," rather than sitting there and saying it to myself, but not putting myself out there.

Multiple students used the language of "putting myself out there" to describe a willing acceptance of the social risk involved in sharing their opinions or ideas.

Leadership self-efficacy. Leadership self-efficacy is the third conceptual meaning that students espoused when speaking of confidence gained from their trip leadership experience. Self-efficacy as proposed by Bandura (1977, 1986) refers to a person's belief in his or her ability to perform within a given domain effectively. Bandura's concept was expanded by Wood and Bandura (1989), who described self-efficacy as a motivating force toward effective action in a given situation. Murphy (2002) applied the concept of self-efficacy to leadership, and a study by Komives et al. (2006) demonstrated that leadership self-efficacy fosters leadership identity development.

Students described feeling more confident in their ability to lead after fulfilling their responsibilities as a leader within the outdoor orientation program. Jessica indicated an increased sense of trust in herself in a leadership role: "I think at the end of it I felt [as if] I could trust myself more in leading." Another student said, "I feel it's definitely, in general, improved my leadership. I feel like I'm more capable and willing to take control of situations" (Tim). Aubrey reported a fundamental change in her personal ability: "It definitely changed me as person in that I know that I can be a leader."

All of these comments indicate a shift in identity. After their role in leading an outdoor orientation program trip, students saw themselves differently—as someone who was capable of leading others successfully: “Maybe the next time I take up a different leadership role I will feel more . . . confident in myself as a leader” (Ross).

These findings confirm and add depth to the results of Fields’s (2010) study, by providing insight into how and why student trip leaders in outdoor orientation programs experience increases in leadership self-efficacy. Confidence in their own ability to be a leader increased as students experienced the leadership role firsthand. Student comments indicated that experiential learning as described by Kolb (1984) led to reflection, abstract generalization, and application of these beliefs toward future leadership opportunities. Students understood the outdoor orientation leadership role to be an important position; for some, it was the first leadership role that they viewed as significant. This is due in part to feelings of responsibility for the experience, safety, and growth of others.

Increased interpersonal ability. Many changes student leaders attributed to their outdoor orientation leadership experience involved aspects of increased interpersonal ability. First, student leaders managed the coleader relationship effectively, articulating personal needs and desires, resolving conflict, and collaborating toward common goals. Second, student leaders facilitated a small community, increased social awareness, and fostered an attitude of acceptance toward others.

Learned to work with another person effectively. After working with a coleader during the outdoor orientation, the peer leaders believed they gained ability to work with others more effectively:

You can get away from the [participants], but your coleader is with you for every decision made, every mess up—they see everything because they know how trips are supposed to be done. And also just like the whole comparing each other’s leadership skills and strengths and weaknesses and having such a close relationship with them—whether you want it or not (laughter). Just talking through things you learn a lot about communication skills. You learn a lot about relational things. You learn a lot about compromise. (Anna)

Communicating clearly and practicing willingness to compromise were important to working well as coleaders. This relationship is not always easy or straightforward, as Anna hints by her humorous reference to the inevitable closeness of the relationship developed. Students pointed to three specific aspects of the leadership experience that improved their ability to work with others in future contexts: articulating personal needs and desires, resolving conflict, and collaborating toward common goals.

Articulating personal needs and desires. Students believed that the trip leadership role increased their ability to communicate personal needs clearly. Amy recalled a critical moment when she and her coleader realized they did not feel supported by each other:

I was like, “I need you to support me. I need you to do this. I need you to do this blah, blah. And this is how you can support me. This is how you’ll be supported. What do you need because I don’t know what you need and you don’t know what I need. So therefore I’m going to tell you all these things—boom. Please do them.”

The trip leadership experience provided opportunity to practice communicating personal needs and seeking to understand the needs of others. Amy said this particular conversation was meaningful not only because of the way it changed the rest of that trip, but also because of the ways it shaped her understanding of communicating needs in future relationships.

Resolving conflict. Anna noted that the leadership experience “helped my communication skills. Especially with conflict” (Anna). When asked to elaborate on what she meant by “conflict,” she described the following general scenario:

You have one vision for the group and another person has a different vision. So talking that through—what you see and why you think that way and then hearing their side and trying to make both of them work in a way both of you agree with so you can both support it fully.

Most student leaders indicated conflict resolution between them and their coleader had been a part of the experience, and many referenced lessons about general conflict resolution they hoped to apply to future relationship contexts.

Collaborating toward common goals. Students described the process of working closely with their coleaders as a collaborative endeavor, and Brandy outlined the various ways collaboration occurs within the leadership dyad: checking in, making decisions together, and supporting each other. She emphasized the constant nature of this interaction and stated that the result of feeling like she managed the coleader relationship well also increased her confidence. Students generally valued their coleader dynamic. Brandy said,

I felt weirdly like I learned a lot in my relationship with my coleader, just because we were really different people, like we really clicked, and we really got along. We really had a vibe, and I felt like I had a little glimpse of what marriage and raising kids is like, because neither of us would want to do something, and I guess it was like the equivalent of, “You make the baby stop crying,” or stuff like that. It’s been pouring rain, and the tarp is pulling, and like, “I fixed it 10 minutes ago,” and, “It’s about to make our [participants] wet.” You have to just know and rely on each other. You have to know what they can do and what you can do. You just have to know each other, totally. That’s a great thing. I think that’s very special to know someone like that. I guess that’s what appeals to me about leading again.

The parenthood analogy is as amusing as it is helpful in understanding the bonds developed between coleaders as they undertake an important, challenging task together. Students believed they learned meaningful lessons from close relationships formed as they partnered with a fellow student with the goal of positively affecting a group of (typically) younger incoming students.

Students also indicated that difficulty in the relationship did not produce negative learning outcomes. Jill, who struggled to relate to her coleader on the trip, described how the difficulty of working with that individual increased her confidence in her ability to work well with others: “Overcoming all those obstacles just gave me a lot of confidence in what I can overcome . . . to know that I could work with someone who I found difficult to work with, that I can make it through that, that then now I feel like I can make it work with anybody to some extent.”

Social facilitator. Students reported having increased awareness of social situations and social needs. Many noticed that they had become more aware of individuals being socially excluded: “I think I’ve always been a very friendly person but I might not have always consciously been aware of how excluded people can feel in certain situations” (Shane). Other students discussed why the trip affected this social awareness:

I really like how, as a leader, it’s your job to be nice and deal with things, even if you don’t necessarily like someone, or see you’re going to be friends with them. I think that’s really important to carry. I think I’ve carried that through, afterwards, keeping in mind that, maybe, this person you think is super annoying, but it’s probably worth it to help them out or whatever in the long run. (Chris)

Chris described the social facilitation as his “job.” He stated that being nice to people he might not relationally gravitate toward is desirable and that his trip leadership role has helped him become more open and accepting of others. He went on to discuss taking the leadership mentality from his trip into other areas of the campus: “I think that it helps me interact with people on a daily basis. Maybe be less selfish, even in my day-to-day, the way that I am day-to-day.”

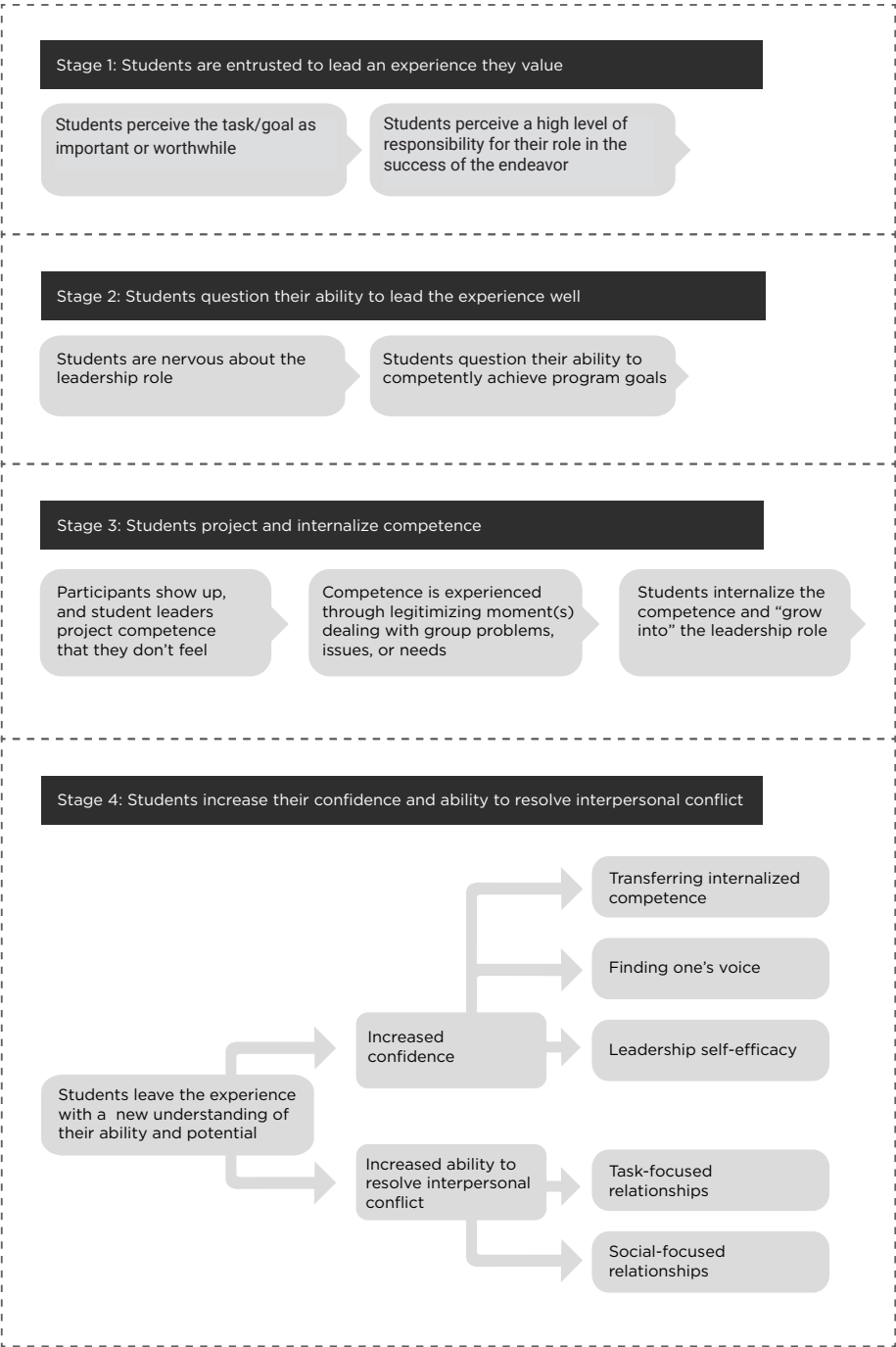


Figure 1. The leader development and growth process.

Spiritual growth. Spiritual growth was not mentioned at all in the non-faith-based programs. Twelve of the 16 student leaders in the faith-based programs reported personal spiritual growth from their leadership experience. Throughout the interview process, no questions about spiritual matters or spiritual growth were asked, though follow-up questions were asked if students mentioned issues of spirituality. This approach was adopted to avoid asking leading questions and strengthens the findings that emerged. Students in the faith-based programs believed they and their participants experienced spiritual growth during the course of the trip:

Whenever I'm in the [wilderness], I always feel like I then come back and I've grown a lot more spiritually just from being exposed to so many different opinions and then the conversations that come up. It's just . . . Like I always come back, and I have so many thoughts and things that I want to think about. (Jill)

Two main themes relating to spiritual growth included dependence on God, and learned and practiced prayer.

Dependence on God. Students in faith-based programs described a shift in their dependence upon God. They attributed their trip leadership experience with an increasing level of trust and expectation that God is in control of all aspects of a given situation:

I was really struck by the faithfulness of God and how it's not about me and what I can do, because I was so amazed how sometimes all I'd have to do is set up this simple activity and I feel like God would speak really powerful through that. I was like, "Wow, that wasn't me and what I facilitated." Sometimes the things that I didn't even plan ended up being the most impactful for people. (Amanda)

Anna echoed a similar sentiment regarding God overseeing the spiritual outcomes of the experience:

I've led several trips since then, not with [the outdoor orientation program], but there is always insecurity at first with a new group. I feel very confident in the wilderness and confident that God will do something. I don't know, I guess there's confidence outside of myself now.

Learned and practiced prayer. Many students in the faith-based programs discussed differences in the frequency, motivation, and confidence of their prayers: "I knew how to pray, I guess, but I learned how to pray again . . . forming those habits was really helpful for me" (Lydia). Lydia attributed significant changes to the way she prays to her trip leadership experience. She also indicated a shift in her motivation to pray—a move from duty to a habitual element of her daily routine. This shift was accompanied by a change in attitude from seeing prayer as something that is "okay" to something that is "desirable" and what she is "called to do." She went on to describe the specific ways in which her prayer life continued to change after her trip:

I think I pray with more confidence. I pray with more assurance that God will hear and will answer . . . I saw the way prayer changes and prayer matters and how the Spirit leads. Instead of something abstract—I'm speaking to the sky or the roof of my tent or whatever—it became more . . . real, and you see the way that God works through the prayers that you say.

For Lydia, prayer changed from meaningless spoken words to an authentic conversation with God. It moved from abstract to reality.

Student leaders in faith-based programs described spiritual changes in terms of depending on God and habitual prayer. The spiritual focus of the two faith-based programs stands in sharp contrast to the other two programs, in which spiritual topics did not arise once over 20 interviews. One leader offered insight regarding why spiritual topics might be avoided in some programs: "We wanted to avoid topics that can make people uncomfortable . . . you just don't

want to talk about things that could be sensitive” (Chloe). Chloe sought to avoid a discussion of sensitive topics, whereas the students in the faith-based programs actively pursued conversations around sensitive issues of faith and spirituality.

Discussion

Leaders of outdoor orientation programs had powerful developmental experiences. All the participants in the study discussed developmental gains they attributed to their participation as leaders. This is an area of student development under-considered in the literature. In this study, the peer leadership experiences had important benefits that were reported at all four college programs.

Students not only benefited, but also had rich experiences. This is likely due to stage–environment fit for the college students. Leading groups with real consequences for safety, for being exposed as frauds, or for conflict caused a great deal of nervousness among the student leaders. But this seemed to be the type of experience the peer leaders hoped to have. They signed up and committed many hours of training to becoming leaders and were eventually tested with a real group in a consequential environment.

The student leaders moved through the process in similar stages at each program, as shown in Figure 1. In Stage 1, the students desire to fulfill an important peer leadership role. A role they likely value from personal experience. The new peer leaders feel responsible for re-creating a powerfully positive experience for the first-years, often mentioning wanting to re-create the trip they experienced as a first-year. New student leaders described the environment of outdoor orientation programs as being characterized by importance and responsibility.

Stage 2 includes training to be a leader, but also doubting if they adequately will fulfill the role. Students question their technical and interpersonal competence and have concerns about their adequacy.

In Stage 3, peer leaders respond by pretending to be more competent than they feel. Peer leaders project competence, but feel nervous about their ability to lead effectively. During this stage, the new leaders described the importance of a legitimizing episode of leadership. Legitimizing experiences help the peer leaders develop confidence in their personal ability. Successfully acting confident led to legitimate confidence.

In Stage 4, students express confidence in leadership across other areas of their life. Student leaders report that leadership identity changed with (1) increased confidence to overcome obstacles, confidence to speak up and speak for what they believe is right, and confidence in their personal proficiency for leadership; (2) interpersonal growth increasing their ability to facilitate social situations; (3) and, for peer leaders at faith-based colleges, increased spiritual growth.

Students overwhelmingly felt nervous about the trip as it began, but personally successful as it ended. Given the frequent reports of these two elements, we believe the outdoor orientation programs contained the appropriate match of challenge and training for the peer leaders. The multifaceted challenges created by the trip leadership environment created anxiety and nervous feelings in the peer leaders, but ultimately they thrived in this environment. They did not know if they had what it takes to be successful, but through this relatively short 4- to 17-day experience, they came to believe that they are capable of more than they thought previously. For most students, this capability revolved around confidence for facing challenges, speaking up, and leading in this environment and future contexts. The ability to facilitate and mediate social situations is also foundational for leadership. Based on the findings of this study, outdoor orientation programs offer student leaders an experience that fosters internal confidence and external social awareness.

Implications for Higher Education and Outdoor Education

Student leaders indicated that at least two elements of the trip environment contributed to growth: student perceptions of importance of their leadership task and the multiple levels of responsibility. In this study, students were given leadership roles that created a sense of ownership *over experiences they valued*, and they reported positive outcomes. Based on these findings, we hypothesize that if student development professionals can empower students with leadership responsibility for experiences that those students perceive as important, similar positive outcomes may emerge. Future research could explore methods for identifying experiences students value as important and exploring opportunities to empower students with appropriate levels of responsibility within those areas.

Outdoor orientation programs exist primarily to serve first-year participants, but these programs also provide unique leadership development opportunities for student leaders. Programs not using students in leadership roles should consider incorporating student leadership experiences to enhance the pursuit of program and institutional goals. Programs already using students in leadership roles should facilitate opportunities to help students understand, express, and transfer learning from the trip leadership experience into other areas of life. Outdoor orientation programs have potential for developing student leaders in an engaging and developmentally appropriate way and, as we learned from this project, providing transformational learning experiences.

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