

# Trust in College Transitions

**Brent J. Bell**

University of New Hampshire

Trust is an important variable for transitioning college students, who report a great amount of fear and uncertainty when beginning college (Bell & Williams, 2006). College students transitioning effectively need to trust both their peers and institutional representatives. Outdoor orientation programs are reported to build upon *trusting variables* such as social support among peers (Bell & Holmes, 2011) and trust of outdoor program leaders (Starbuck, 2012), yet few studies have measured trust among college students participating in an outdoor orientation program. This study examined students' reported levels of trust at 16 college outdoor orientation programs to provide a better understanding of the importance of trust in college transition.

## Literature Review

Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) define trust as the willingness of an actor to be vulnerable based on positive expectations about the intentions or actions of another under conditions of uncertainty. This definition is one of many similar definitions in the psychological literature. In this study, a data-supported definition of trust was used, separating trust into two distinct factors:

- *reliable trust*—having faith people will do what they say they will do (actions) and
- *disclosure trust*—sharing personal information, expecting it will be handled carefully (keeping secrets).

Gillespie (2003) defined these types of trust as independent factors. In this study, the researcher differentiated *trust of peer group* from *trust of leaders* by adapting the Behavioral Trust Inventory (Gillespie, 2003).

The questions in this study were as follows: Do first year students report high levels of trust in outdoor orientation programs? Do any students report low levels of trust? Do students differ in how much they trust their leaders compared how much they trust their peers?

## Method

Program directors from 25 colleges were sent information to participate in The Outdoor Orientation Benchmarking Survey (TOOBS). The survey link was sent on October 11, 2014, after most college students had been at college for more than 6 weeks. Six weeks was chosen as a time near the middle of the semester when students are most likely to have experienced the realities of college papers and tests, and mitigating any issues potentially hidden by the “forming” stage of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The Behavioral Trust Inventory was used as the measurement tool. It was developed “. . . for the measurement of trust between leaders,

team members, and peers in a range of groups of and organizations, and items were specifically chosen for their generalizability across a range of contexts” (Gillespie, 2003). With permission, the BTI was adapted by replacing the word *work* with *college* to represent the population more accurately.

## Results

Students from 16 colleges participated in the survey ( $N = 809$ ). Students reported high levels of reliable leader trust ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 1$ ), see Table 1, compared to Gillespie’s (2003) previous work in which she cited high levels of reliable trust ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = .96$ ). Students also reported high levels of disclosure trust ( $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) compared to Gillespie’s reported high trust results ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

To investigate low trust scores, defined as a score of 1 on the 7-point scale, the researcher examined the numbers of students reporting the lowest trust score (1). The results ranged from  $n = 2$  to  $n = 20$  depending on the question. Students reported being most unwilling to discuss with leaders or peers problems or issues that could potentially embarrass them ( $n = 20$ , 3% of sample). Students reported that they were most willing to trust leaders’ technical skills and trusted their peers to back them up in difficult situations.

The differences in trust between peers and leaders demonstrated higher levels of reported trust for leaders across all variables.

**Table 1**  
*Behavioral Trust Inventory Scores (7-Point Scale)*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall Trust	671	5.66	1.05
Overall Trust of Peers	678	5.50	1.21
Overall Trust of Leaders	702	5.80	1.05
Reliable Trust Between Peers	678	5.47	1.21
Reliable Trust of Leaders	705	5.97	1.00
Disclosure Trust Between Peers	687	5.55	1.36
Disclosure Trust of Leaders	706	5.64	1.29

## Discussion

The data show that first year students report high levels of trust after participation in outdoor orientation programs. The results among outdoor orientation students are higher than any other published results in Behavioral Trust Inventory studies. The participants reported higher levels of trust among their leaders. This may partly be due to a *regression to the mean*, because trust of the group is averaged over more people. A small percentage (3% or less) of students reported an unwillingness to trust compared to an average of 40% of students reporting they were *completely willing* to trust their peers/leaders.

Given the number of “trust” activities and programming specific to building trust in outdoor orientation programs, these results verify high levels of both reliable and disclosure trust in participants after an outdoor orientation program.

---

## References

- Bell, B. J., & Holmes, M. R. (2011). Important factors leading to outdoor orientation program outcomes: A qualitative exploration of survey results. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 3, 26–39. <https://doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1075>
- Bell, B. J., & Williams, B. G. (2006). Learning from first-year fears: An analysis of the Harvard First-Year Outdoor Program's "Fear in a Hat" exercise. *Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 14(1), 47–61.
- Gillespie, N. (2003). *Measuring trust in working relationships: The behavioral trust inventory*. Paper presented at the Academy of Management Conference, Seattle, WA.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20, 709–734.
- Starbuck, J. D. (2012). *Developing competence: A qualitative inquiry of college student leadership in university outdoor orientation programs* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of New Hampshire, Durham.
- Tuckman, B., & Jensen, M. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group and Organization Studies*, 2, 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105960117700200404>