

Outdoor Education Academic Programs in the United States

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The growth of outdoor adventure programs developed, in part, from the Outward Bound movement in the 1970s (MacArthur, 1979; Outward Bound, 1968), which created a demand for specialized collegiate training. Since the inaugural conference on outdoor pursuits in higher education at Appalachian State University in 1974 (Smathers, 1974), approximately 100 academic programs granting baccalaureate degrees in outdoor recreation, outdoor experiential education, and related areas have emerged in the United States. This study reports on academic degree-granting outdoor programs in the United States more than 40 years after their development, addressing the questions, what types of institutions offer degrees in outdoor education? What labels are used for programs? What is their concentration in different geographic regions of the United States? What is the cost of programs? Are enrollments increasing or decreasing? At what rate do first-year students enter into these programs, and at what rate do they transfer from other programs or majors within the institution?

Method

An initial list of 81 academic outdoor programs was created using www.outdoored.com, Internet search engines, and personal knowledge. An online survey was sent via Qualtrics to these programs and to contacts provided by the Association for Experiential Education and the Association for Outdoor Recreation and Education. In total, 96 institutions with academic outdoor programs were invited to complete the survey. Publicly available data, such as geographic location and Carnegie type (public/private), were collected from website searches. Data were cleaned and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

A total of 100 outdoor programs participated in the survey. Programs without an undergraduate degree ($n = 16$) were excluded, and programs with multiple responses per institution were combined by averaging responses. The result was a dataset of 62 programs in the United States, representing 65% of the originally identified program population.

Types of Institutions Offering Outdoor Academic Programs (and Costs)

To compare costs, “sticker price” was the basis of comparison, which is the overall total cost including tuition, room and board, and fees. Importantly, “net” price typically varies by family income level as a percentage of this figure due to financial aid, with private colleges providing more aid than public institutions. Typically private school attendees pay 58% of the sticker price, whereas public school attendees pay 75%. Sticker price is known to impact college selection (Bui, 2015; Piccoli, 2014). Table 1 shows results of institutional categories in the sample and mean (and standard deviation) of the sticker price, overall $M(SD) = \$26,839 (\$10,751; \text{Seaman, Bell, \& Trauntvein, 2017})$.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participating Institutions and Sticker Price by Category

Carnegie type	Sticker price		Carnegie size classification	Sticker price		Geographic regions	Sticker price		
Public	42	\$20,297	Very Small ($< 1,000$)	10	\$38,300	West	17	\$23,642	
	(68%)	(\$4,313)		(16%)	(\$4,620)		(27%)	(\$9,459)	
Private	19	\$39,578	Small (1,000–2,999)	13	\$33,200	Midwest	12	\$21,666	
				(31%)	(\$7530)		(21%)	(\$12,848)	(19%)
				Medium (3,000–9,999)	18	\$20,437	Northeast	17	\$33,375
					(29%)	(\$6,880)		(27%)	(\$11,272)
Large ($> 10,000$)	20	\$23,050	South	14	\$28,076				
	(32%)	(\$8,300)		(23%)	(\$11,146)				

Program Enrollment

Respondents were asked to indicate whether enrollments over the past 5 years were increasing, decreasing, or staying the same, and whether they felt their programs were currently overenrolled, underenrolled, or at the right level. Overall, 40% of programs reported enrollments increasing, 28% reported a decrease, and 27% reported staying the same (5% don’t know/NA). In addition, 3% reported being overenrolled, 54% report feeling underenrolled, and 42% at the right level. Table 2 breaks enrollments down by institutional category.

Table 2
Enrollment Trends by Institutional Category/Attribute (remainders = don’t know/NA)

Carnegie type	Enrollment			Carnegie size	Enrollment			Geographic region	Enrollment		
	Incr.	Decr.	Same		Incr.	Decr.	Same		Incr.	Decr.	Same
Public	45%	20%	30%	Very Small	30%	30%	40%	West	27%	27%	40%
Private	32%	42%	21%	Small	31%	54%	15%	Midwest	42%	25%	33%
				Medium	61%	11%	22%	Northeast	47%	29%	12%
				Large	33%	22%	33%	South	50%	29%	21%

Within the above categories, respondents from private institutions were more likely to report that their programs were underenrolled (74% vs. 44%), and respondents from medium (53%) and large (50%) institutions were more likely to report being happy with current enrollments over those from very small (20%) and small (39%) institutions.

Student Entry Points

Respondents indicated that only 32% of programs had a first-year class that equaled one quarter of the program participants, meaning that 68% of the programs are likely to attract majors by transfer. Three colleges reported the reverse issue, with more than 50% of the program comprising first-year students, indicating a lack of retention to the major. Thirty-two percent of programs reported an increase in internal transfer students (2% reported a decrease) and 42% reported an increase in external transfers (10% reported a decrease).

In open-ended responses, programs reporting increases in enrollments offered the following reasons: the strength of the programs ($n = 5$), increase in recreational interests ($n = 4$), and institutional support ($n = 3$), whereas programs listing reasons for decreasing enrollments reported lack of institutional support ($n = 6$), the economic challenges of a career in outdoor education ($n = 5$), and a weak outdoor program ($n = 3$).

Discussion

Outdoor education training for undergraduate students is available at more than 81 colleges and universities in the United States. The 62 programs surveyed had similar structures in requirements for wilderness first-aid training, requirements of field courses, use of internships, and a focus on leadership. The programs are not centralized by size of institution or geographic area. The most common feature between programs is requiring internships, followed by wilderness medical training in their curriculum. Program representatives generally report increasing or stabilized numbers of students enrolled in outdoor education programs (at 72% of programs). Institutional support is listed as a top reason for both increases and decreases in program enrollment. Because outdoor education may be viewed by potential enrollees as an alternative career path, the support of the institution in legitimizing the value of the academic program may be important to enrollments. Beyond the importance of institutional support is the question of how outdoor education programs are organized internally and externally. As in the past, programs currently possess a number of different titles and are housed in a variety of departments. Not only is this a possible impediment to program visibility at the point of entry for some students, but it could also inhibit public recognition of the scope of outdoor professions on the collegiate landscape. This condition might be imposing limitations; however, opportunities could also exist for mutual support among programs to enhance visibility.

References

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