

# **The Value of Accreditation for Outdoor Leadership Education Programs**

**Will Hobbs**  
Georgia College

**Kelli McMahan**  
Baylor University

**Jeannette Stawski**  
Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education

## **Abstract**

More than 50 years have passed since the first programs emerged in the United States for outdoor leaders. In that time, the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) has equipped countless outdoor leaders to plan and implement safe, enjoyable expeditions in the backcountry with minimal environmental impact (Petzoldt, 1984). In 2017, the WEA Board of Directors hosted a diverse group of professionals who examined and discussed the value, constraints, and benefits of accreditation for outdoor leadership education. While the meeting has implications specific to the ongoing efforts and initiatives of the WEA, the outcomes from these conversations provide insight and direction far beyond the scope of WEA operations and products, indicating general and specific challenges for any accepted accreditation scheme. Until the outdoor industry can collectively agree on minimum qualifications and expectations for outdoor leadership education, the “professional” status of leaders, managers, and educators will remain in question both within and outside the industry. This commentary shares the primary goals and structure of the gathering and perspectives from the participants, representatives from other accreditation schemes, and the leadership of the WEA and the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) to add to the discussion on the value of formalized external review and its application to applied curriculums.

**KEYWORDS:** outdoor leadership; Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education; Wilderness Education Association; accreditation; training and development; standards

Caneday (2017) has defined accreditation as a process of documenting three aspects of an education program's quality: *competence*, *authority*, and *credibility*. "Accredited" status denotes an established benchmark for professionalism and consistency of product. Currently, three systems serve the outdoor recreation and adventure industry by examining these components to varying degrees. The Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT) serves 74 higher education programs with a *curricular* accreditation that caters to a more generalized audience—academic preparation for municipal parks, recreation, and tourism-related professions. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has become a strong force for setting *operational* standards for a range of program settings (recreational, educational, development, and therapeutic). As of 2018, the AEE (2018) has accredited 60 programs including wilderness/adventure, university and college, K–12 schools, therapeutic, and corporate team-building/training. The Wilderness Education Association (WEA) launched accreditation in 2010 to capture a niche for professional preparation of outdoor leaders and educators. Three outdoor leadership education programs hold accredited status under the WEA scheme, and one additional program is under review (WEA, 2016).

In light of the apparent low acceptance and integration of these accreditation schemes into training and development programs in relation to the industry at large, we suggest that until there is agreement on the minimum qualifications and expectations for outdoor leadership education, the "professional" status of leaders, managers, and educators will remain in question both in and outside the industry. We derive our discussion from the conversations and group work of an assembly of industry experts who gathered in New Mexico in 2017 to discuss these issues within the context of the WEA accreditation scheme.

## Background

The longstanding vision of the WEA has been to professionalize the training and development of outdoor leaders for the entire industry, and the association has maintained a constant presence in curriculum development for outdoor leader certification. Paul Petzoldt, Frank Lupton, Chuck Gregory, and Bob Christie originally envisioned a deep level of leader training through university and collegiate programs. They formed the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) in 1977 as a network of independent affiliate organizations committed to training leaders on the central pillars of leadership, judgment, and decision making (see Cain, 1985; Cockrell, 1991; Drury, Bonney, Berman, & Wagstaff, 2005). The curriculum and the delivery model distinguished the WEA from other outdoor leadership development programs, for example, the National Outdoor Leadership School and Outward Bound (both heavily influenced by Petzoldt).

In 2008, the WEA published standards for curriculum instruction, design, and operations—a positive trend recently identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2016)—and expanded to program accreditation specific to professional outdoor leadership development (Pelchat & Krup, 2012; Sugerman, 1999). WEA accreditation refers to a systematic and thorough external review of a program's operations, curricular content, and design, for determining its capacity and success in providing the minimum level of educational quality for outdoor leadership education.

## The Accreditation Summit

After 5 years invested in a curricular accreditation with lower than expected engagement, the WEA began a process of evaluating the status of accreditation at macro (industry) and micro (WEA-specific) levels. In early 2017, the WEA Board of Directors hosted a meeting to elicit input and advice from outdoor industry stakeholders about the challenges and opportunities created by accreditation. To capture a diverse perspective, the board invited a group of professionals from across the industry to this open event: academic and campus recreation programs, K–12

schools, camps, outdoor programs, professional associations, wilderness medicine providers, and publishing partners.

Summit sessions were a mix of small and large group discussions, problem-based collaborations, and round-robin-style group work. Acknowledged experts in accreditation from COAPRT, AEE, and higher education hosted discussion sessions via teleconference. The summit concluded with a session devoted to certification and its appropriateness as a by-product of accreditation.

## Summit Discussion

The following section presents the central themes that emerged from the discussions, sessions, and group work at the Summit.

**1. Accreditation raises the professional profile of the organization and the individual.** The label “accredited” carries a higher expectation of quality and rigor, as well as a demonstrated adherence to an industry standard. Operational standards create consistency across programs in policy and procedures and risk management; curricular standards create consistency across programs in the training and development of the outdoor professional. To achieve consistency, the industry must collectively agree on an accepted scope of practice (i.e., what outdoor leaders do and where they work). Curricular standards only emerge when the industry can articulate these clear professional boundaries. We suggest that the scope of practice can be identified through an examination of the normal field functions and common educational components within current training schemes. These, then, provide the curricular standards (i.e., what is—and what is not—effective training and development). As these standards are consciously identified and accepted in practice, the field begins to take the shape of a “profession.” Accreditation, then, is the ongoing assessment of these standards that have been codified from accepted norms of practice and education; it is a systematic, high-quality external review process that adds credibility to a program and to the industry (Austin et al., 2017). An industry without clear professional boundaries will be challenged to accept (or even benefit from) any accreditation scheme.

**2. Identity, collaboration, and compromise are barriers to accreditation in the outdoor industry.** The outdoor industry has recognized that the dramatically diverse contexts and settings for which outdoor professionals must be trained make curricular accreditation difficult. Defining a comprehensive and meaningful scope of practice has been a historical challenge, but it is also a deeply rooted identity issue for our field. The standards from the AEE have made tremendous strides in defining minimum quality for program operations and management, but the curricular side (training and education) operates more intuitively. Curricular standards must reflect a unified industry with common expectations for the outdoor professional; this requires authentic collaboration (i.e., a willingness to submit to best practices **across** the industry).

We heard a common misperception: Accreditation will require sacrificing distinctive elements that help form individual program identity. In some ways, this may be true. A standard does define the *minimum* level of educational quality, implying that some educational practices are in fact better (more effective) than others. This may indeed mean that a program must yield to the standard and adapt its program design to achieve the minimum. In this way, standards may certainly be viewed as constraints to freedom and creativity. The challenge, then, is to balance individualized programming with *mutual accountability*, rather than centralized control (Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors [ASPA], 2013a). Mutual accountability—or allowing external access to your curricular decisions and external input on your process—unifies an otherwise ambiguous or loosely formed profession.

Finally, one accreditation scheme cannot possibly accommodate the wide diversity of settings, skills, clients, and so forth in our industry. The positive distinctions among current accrediting bodies in the outdoor industry (WEA, AEE, COAPRT, AMGA, etc.) should be recognized and celebrated as strengths rather than challenges and should be allowed to influence

one another; this is just good practice (ASPA, 1995). This begins with communication first—listening and exploring the value of the diverse accreditation processes—and moves forward as the accrediting bodies choose to collaborate to avoid overlapping or conflicting standards.

**3. The strength of the WEA accreditation is the WEA curriculum,** a curriculum built to develop professional outdoor leaders and educators: “Whatever the area of study, public protection or entry level competence is the baseline, and the development of capable new professionals is a fundamental goal” (ASPA, 2013b, Quality section, para. 1). The WEA’s niche in leadership training and development is rooted “in and through” the wilderness. While not a requirement of accreditation, the remote context represents an effective method for equipping and preparing outdoor leaders and educators for *any* setting. With WEA accreditation, freedom and creativity are highly valued and esteemed in program delivery and assessment of the desired outcomes—the individually based measures of the program’s educational quality. In other words, a *program’s* effectiveness can be measured by the progress of *individual* students toward the stated outcomes. Outcomes written as standards—as in the WEA model—define the minimum educational quality for the training and development of outdoor leaders.

## Insight From the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education

In spite of the national exposure and professional growth of the outdoor industry, neither a comparable increase in oversight (risk management) nor widely accepted outcomes for training and development have appeared. The outdoor recreation industry is emerging as a major economic driver, estimated to contribute between 2% and 5% (\$400 billion–\$800 billion) of the entire U.S. gross domestic product (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018; Outdoor Industry Association, 2017). This industry is gaining significant social and political attention: for positive recreational benefits and for concerns about (a) the protection of natural and wild spaces and (b) access to outdoor recreation for individuals who have limited to no previous exposure or lack adequate skills to participate safely. The outdoor recreation and education industry is maturing into a dynamic profession inclusive of retailers and land managers; outfitters and guides; educators and therapists; environmental education and interpretation programs; and infrastructure and facility management of climbing walls, rental centers, waterfronts, challenge courses, and greenways. This represents a significant opportunity for professionalizing the field.

Accreditation can help bridge the gap between experience and education and can improve academic program efficacy, impact, and economics. The experts who presented at the Summit clearly articulated the power of accreditation to defend program expenses and (re)allocation of resources. But degree programs in the outdoor industry have an unfortunate reputation for training students in skills that are not entirely useful, so employers tend to prefer leadership skills and/or national-level certifications ahead of an academic degree (Seaman, Bell, & Trauntvein, 2017). A well-designed accreditation scheme for outdoor leadership education that is built collaboratively across the industry and demonstrates consistent and reliable outcomes could bridge the gap and strengthen collaboration between professional education and the workforce.

Finally, for all the benefits of a well-defined scope of practice, the process of articulating those clear professional boundaries can often disguise institutionalized, unintended, or even blatant exclusion of some programs and communities. A credible accreditation scheme for outdoor leadership must include a range of perspectives to address these concerns. The AORE sees tremendous value in the WEA’s efforts to establish minimum expectations for **all** outdoor leadership development programs.

## Final Notes

The general tenor of the Summit dialogue affirmed the value of a comprehensive external evaluation of programmatic outcomes and quality and the WEA’s move to accreditation. Summit

attendees called for a renewed focus on curriculum development to maintain a consistent focus on training and developing outdoor leaders for a backcountry setting. Any accrediting body must work to communicate the tangible benefits of accreditation for programs, students, and the industry and work to identify and resolve barriers to add value to accreditation. Summit participants echoed the experts: The expected scope of practice for outdoor leaders and educators within the specific range of settings needs to be identified—clear professional boundaries.

Accreditation can provide a valid basis for programmatic expansion, resource allocation, and staffing decisions, among others. It builds credibility and trustworthiness over time. Perhaps most important, accreditation moves us toward a shared vision for professionalism. But success is deeply dependent on the ownership and investment for the entire industry—academics, practitioners, association boards, skills experts, students, the general public. It takes a quality process and stakeholders who not only support the process but also willingly participate in it, who see the potential and are willing to collectively move the field toward professionalism.

The 2017 Summit was intended to be one of many strategic endeavors that bring partners together to work on behalf of the industry. The AORE and WEA recently hosted a joint conference on October 24–26, 2018, in Snowbird, Utah, and will continue to explore the potential of future educational collaborations that may provide a mechanism to better inform, engage, empower, and advance outdoor recreation and education students and professionals.

## References

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2016). *Higher education learning outcomes assessment movement moves away from standardized tests, according to new national survey: Increasing focus on rubrics applied to student work products and on student engagement in research and hands-on projects* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/press/press-releases/higher-education-learning-outcomes-assessment-movement-moves-away-standardized>
- Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. (1995). *Values for success in accreditation*. Retrieved from <http://www.aspa-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/values-for-success-in-accreditation-1995.pdf>
- Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. (2013a). *ASPA - Member code of good practice*. Retrieved from <http://aspatest.rwksolvesit.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Code-of-Good-Practice-apr-2013.pdf>
- Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. (2013b). Quick reference: Standards, outcome, and quality. Retrieved from [https://www.aspa-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ASPA\\_Standards\\_Jun12.pdf](https://www.aspa-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ASPA_Standards_Jun12.pdf)
- Austin, J., Funnell, A., Hirsch, J., Lindsey, M., Nordquist, J., Pace, S., & Wolf, P. (Eds.). (2017). *Manual for the accreditation of adventure programs* (6th ed.). Boulder, CO: Author.
- Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2018). Outdoor recreation. Retrieved from <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>
- Cain, K. D. (1985). Wilderness Education Association certification. In J. Miles & R. Watters (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 1984 Conference on Outdoor Recreation* (pp. 53–61). Pocatello: Idaho State University Press.
- Caneday, L. (2017, February). *WEA & accreditation*. Lecture presented at the Wilderness Education Association Accreditation Summit, Glorieta, NM.
- Cockrell, D. (1991). *The wilderness educator: The Wilderness Education Association curriculum guide*. Merrillville, IN: ICS Books.
- Drury, J., Bonney, B., Berman, D., & Wagstaff, M. (2005). *The backcountry classroom: Lessons, tools, and activities for teaching outdoor leaders* (2nd ed.). Guilford, CT: Falcon/Globe Pequot Press.

- Outdoor Industry Association. (2017). *The outdoor recreation economy report*. Retrieved from [https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA\\_RecEconomy\\_FINAL\\_Single.pdf](https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA_RecEconomy_FINAL_Single.pdf)
- Pelchat, C., & Krup, G. (2012). A historical view of outdoor leadership curricular development and the future with action research. *Schole, 2*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1937156X.2012.11949685>
- Petzoldt, P. K. (1984). *The new wilderness handbook*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Seaman, J., Bell, B. J., & Trauntvein, N. E. (2017). Assessing the value of a college degree in outdoor education or recreation: Institutional comparisons using the College Scorecard and surveys of faculty and employers. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership, 9*, 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2017-V9-I1-7474>
- Sugerman, D. (1999). Outdoor leadership education: The past, present, and future. In R. Jones (Comp.), *ICORE '98: Proceedings from the International Conference on Outdoor Recreation and Education*. Retrieved from Eric Document Reproduction Services. (ED427926)
- Wilderness Education Association. (2016). Accreditation. Retrieved from <http://www.weainfo.org/accreditation>