

Outdoor Industry Credential: Exploring Perspectives Within the Profession

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Abstract

This paper reviews the findings of a professional task force from the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE), which explored the feasibility of and support for a credentialing system for students and young professionals aspiring to a career in the outdoor industry. The task force used initial public discussions to design a survey, which was then sent to AORE members. The quantitative and qualitative data revealed an almost 50% division in favor of/against a credentialing system. In general, younger professionals and students expressed more interest in a credential than seasoned veterans did. All respondents identified similar challenges to a credentialing system: cost versus benefit, assessing and evaluating the qualifications, and a lack of value-added (a sense that there are already too many credentials in the industry). Although credentialing can signal a unified profession that agrees on the professional competencies required for effective professional practice, our findings indicate the outdoor industry is not yet there.

KEYWORDS: credential; outdoor leadership; certification; outdoor professional; industry standards

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In the summer of 2017, the Association for Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) approved the formation of a task force chartered to explore the feasibility of and support for a credentialing system for students and young professionals aspiring to become outdoor leaders. The Credential Task Force (CTF) was to make recommendations and, if a system was desired and viable, propose a plan to the AORE Board of Directors for developing a credentialing system for outdoor leaders. A call for applicants to the CTF was initiated in the fall of 2017. The final composition of the CTF was vetted by the initiator of the task force, AORE's executive director and AORE's board president. Individuals were selected to represent gender, employment, and perspective diversity. Seven applicants from a variety of higher education institutions (academic and nonacademic programs), with each group member averaging 20 years of experience working in the outdoor industry, were selected for the final CTF group.

The task force began meeting in the fall of 2017. The first step was to examine the purpose of a credential and to become familiar with relevant terminology, including licensure, micro-credentials, digital badge systems, and professional endorsements. The task force researched credentialing systems used by other organizations and similar industries, gathered data from emerging and current professionals, and discussed a range of credentialing options to critically explore options regarding the feasibility and interest of a credential for student members and young professionals. Additionally, the committee explored commonly accepted industry certifications (e.g., wilderness medicine) and potential partnerships or collaborations. Much of the motivation of this exploratory process was to fulfill AORE's mission toward supporting professionalism of the outdoor industry.

Background

Clearly, certifications are prolific and widely accepted within the outdoor industry. The diversity of setting, terrain, and activity has resulted in numerous technical skill certifications and other measures of professional practice that commonly appear in job announcements. Certification in wilderness medicine (e.g., *Wilderness First Aid or Responder*) and training in Leave No Trace are two foundational qualifications often listed as minimum requirements for employment. Specific technical trainings and certifications (e.g., rock climbing, whitewater paddling, avalanche) are just as common. In the profession, there seems to be a consensus that these measures provide evidence of individual knowledge, skills, and abilities for a given skill set at a given moment. Certifications in our profession provide (1) an indicator of competence; (2) proof of knowledge, generally through practical and written exams; and (3) mechanisms for ongoing continuing education. In contrast, certificates acknowledge completion of training or progress toward a competency and are utilized to recognize professional development.

Competency is a commonly used term to describe the level of qualifications of an outdoor leader (i.e., the *depth* of skills necessary to lead, facilitate, or instruct certain activities). During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a great deal of focus on organizing and defining traits, attributes, competencies, and so on that were required of outdoor leaders (see Bilodeau, 1987; Buell, 1981; Cockrell & LaFollette, 1985; Cousineau, 1977; Green, 1982; Petzoldt, 1974; Priest, 1984). Competencies were often organized around categories such as hard, soft, or meta skills (Phipps & Swiderski, 1990; Priest, 1999; Swiderski, 1987). Drury, Bonney, Berman, and Wagstaff (2005) used a classification of knowledge, skills/abilities, and dispositions to describe competencies within the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) 18-point curriculum. In a review of past outdoor leadership research, Priest and Gass (2018) identified 12 elements of outdoor leadership competence including technical skills, safety skills, environmental skills, organizational skills, instructional skills, facilitation skills, flexible leadership style, experience-based judgment, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, effective communication, and professional ethics. Martin, Breunig, Wagstaff, and Goldenberg (2017) referred to eight competencies including foundational knowledge, self-awareness and professional conduct, decision making

and judgment, teaching and facilitation, environmental stewardship, program management, safety and risk management, and technical ability.

Standards serve as benchmarks to evaluate quality and performance of individuals and programs. Successful and meaningful certification programs hold participants to measurable individual performance standards (Watters, 2006). These might be formal standards set by a formal body or de facto standards, which are widespread practices accepted by a majority of programs and practitioners (Pace, Hansen-Stamp, & Leemon, 2017). These defining terms (competency, standards) symbolize a high level of professional expectations and practice. Yet, in contrast with other client/service-oriented industries, the outdoor leadership profession does not recognize one overarching credential or one professional association to provide oversight or management of such a credential, unlike professions such as counseling, athletic training, or therapeutic recreation. This can be a challenge for potential employees and employers alike, as credentials are widely accepted as evidence of knowledge, qualifications, achievement, professional quality, and overall suitability for a profession.

Without credentialing standards, there is ambiguity in the generally accepted practices of outdoor leadership. Alternately, the absence of comprehensive standards may suggest there is no need for credentials, as the industry is too diverse or still too young to warrant professional practice under one set of standards. For instance, Welch, Clement, and Berman (2009) investigated Wilderness First Aid (WFA) as an industry standard. They reviewed multiple aspects of the outdoor industry including regulatory authorities, national organizations, and schools to understand how each viewed wilderness medicine certification for leaders. The authors found that WFA was not an industry standard, suggesting that this highlighted the diversity within the outdoor industry and the absence of a need for universal standards.

But clearly there is a need for establishing one's bona fides: Practitioners are regularly required to demonstrate competency and qualifications to gain employment and to be able to lead and instruct in the field. To obtain a permit for guiding/instruction in Joshua Tree National Park (JTNP), for example, one must provide evidence of minimum medical qualifications, knowledge of minimum impact practices, and all applicable National Park Service rules and regulations (NPS Instructions Commercial Use Authorization Application). Furthermore, JTNP requires rock climbing leaders to provide proof of training and certifications, such as certification through the American Mountain Guides Association.

The "30,000-foot" view might suggest that with the abundance of recognized skill certifications, industry standards, and commonly accepted competencies, outdoor leadership is well defined. A closer look might suggest that there is a lack of agreement or clear expectation of the meaning of "professional outdoor leader," much less how one becomes a professional outdoor leader. While it was beyond the role of the task force to evaluate if standards are clearly articulated in the literature, task force members recognized this lack of clarity as an opportunity to explore the role and potential of credentials. One possibility is a single credential managed and/or endorsed by AORE that might provide a clear path for professional development for outdoor leaders, satisfy land managers and their permitting requirements, and provide clarity to employers. The general purpose of the CTF was to gather data from emerging and current professionals and critically explore options regarding the feasibility and interest of a credential for AORE student members and young professionals.

Method

The CTF used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data for this study. First, CTF members facilitated two educational sessions during the 2017 AORE conference to gather initial input from AORE members and conference attendees regarding the need for a credentialing system in outdoor leadership. All conference attendees were invited to participate and approximately 50 people attended the two sessions. Session presenters described the CTF

charge and provided a general overview of task force responsibilities. Attendees provided input through dialogue and clarifying questions. The task force then used the feedback from the AORE sessions to design a survey to conduct a more systematic assessment of the need for a credentialing system in outdoor leadership.

The survey instrument was piloted in February 2018 with approximately 40 individuals from a convenience sample of AORE members. Feedback was incorporated into the final survey, which was titled the AORE Membership Credentialing Survey. The final version of the survey consisted of two sections and collected quantitative and qualitative data. Section 1 included demographic questions (i.e., membership status, years of work experience, gender, employment sector). Section 2 used branching logic to garner opinions and ideas concerning the need for the credential. For example, a favorable response to the question, “In principle, are you in favor of an AORE credentialing system for students and new professionals?” introduced another set of questions. The six questions gauged respondent opinions about the preferred scope/breadth of a credential, identification of industry needs, constraints/barriers, and potential collaboration. An unfavorable response to the branching question introduced four additional questions. Similarly, participants were asked to identify constraints/barriers and preferred scope of a potential credential. All participants were provided the opportunity to provide opinions and ideas in an open-ended question format.

The survey utilized purposive sampling of the AORE membership and was sent to 750 AORE members in April 2018. Participants were also asked to share the survey with nonmembers, which expanded the reach of the survey. Descriptive and quantitative responses were analyzed via SPSS. Qualitative responses were analyzed for frequency of responses. All committee members independently reviewed the narrative responses and identified common themes, which were then cross-checked to ensure accurate interpretation of concerns and opinions of the membership.

A total of 199 members completed the survey, a response rate of 30%. Of those participants, 33.7% identified as a woman, 63.8% identified as a man, and 2% preferred not to say. All but one participant was an AORE member at the time of the survey. Table 1 shows descriptive details about participants’ years in the industry and identified professional field.

Table 1
Years in the Outdoor Industry and Professional Field

Descriptive	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
Years in the industry		
0–1 years	2	1.0
1–2 years	12	6.1
3–5 years	36	18.3
6–10 years	43	21.8
More than 11 years	104	52.8
Professional field		
Military recreation	5	2.5
College/university campus recreation	135	67.8
College/university academic	32	16.1
Public Parks Recreation	1	.5
Not for-profit	10	5.0
For-profit	5	2.5
Public land manager	1	.5
Other	9	4.5

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the viewpoints of the participants regarding the need for an outdoor leadership credentialing system. Nearly half of the participants ($n = 98$, 49.2%) reported being in favor of a credentialing system for students and new professionals, while slightly less than half ($n = 97$, 48.7%) were not in favor.

In Favor

Participants who favored the development of an outdoor leadership credential were asked to select the type of credential deemed most beneficial to a wide range of stakeholders. The majority (33%) indicated that a system should be based on a person's accumulated experiences, existing credentials, and other professional activities. Others (6%) favored a system based on formalized training and testing similar to other traditional certification programs. In addition, participants "in favor" were asked to rank seven possible purpose statements in order of importance for an AORE credential. The top three purpose statements included

1. to validate professional experience through a professional organization (16%),
2. to assess knowledge and skills based on professional standards (15%), and
3. to assist students and new professionals in their professional development (14%).

The two least important purpose statements were "to endorse existing certification and other credentials" and "to provide a professional service to students and new professionals." Other options included "to help new students and professionals gain employment" and "to serve as a standard for acquiring permits." Although only 13.5% of participants were students/student professionals, a majority were in favor of an AORE supported credential.

Not In Favor

Participants who reported that they were not in favor of the development of an outdoor leadership credential were asked to select their primary reasons from six possible answers for not supporting the credential. The three most frequently selected reasons were

1. too many credentials already in the outdoor profession (36.3%),
2. I need more information to be able to support a credential (26.4%), and
3. other (15.4%).

Participants who selected "other" reported that it did not fit the mission of AORE (13.2%), while others believed that students and new professionals would benefit more from other services (7.7%). The mission alignment appeared to be important. Several participants hoped that the board of directors would focus on more important issues facing the organization. Many mentioned that there were already too many credentials in the industry and pointed to past initiatives by other outdoor organizations that had not been successful. A number of participants also reported that the timing was wrong and cited concerns surrounding the potential costs to AORE and those pursuing the credential. There were also some concerns with the current administrative infrastructure of the AORE and its capacity to manage a credential.

Finally, those against the idea were also asked to state their preference *if* a credentialing system was created. Some preferred a system built on an individual's accumulated experience (18.1%) or a system built on performance standards (3%). A majority, however, said they still would not support the credential no matter what (19.1%).

Shared Issues/Challenges

Both groups (those in favor and those not in favor) were asked to identify issues or challenges with an AORE credential. Both groups noted the difficulty of ensuring consistent quality

across credential providers and the affordability of a credential. Sixty-three percent of participants who were in favor of the credential indicated that such a credential should not be cost prohibitive and should be inclusive of those with diverse backgrounds and abilities. There was general support for collaborating with other organizations, especially from those who support specialized technical skills training. Participants indicated that a credential should reflect a person's experience as opposed to assessing specialized skills. There seemed to be more support for a holistic credential that captures the larger concept of outdoor leadership as opposed to skills-based certification.

Discussion

The goal of the CTF was to explore the feasibility and support for an outdoor leadership credentialing system for students and young professionals aspiring to become outdoor leaders. While the results did not show strong support one way or another, it uncovered important commonalities between respondents, as well as a need for more research to address the need for such a credentialing system as well as the nature and scope of such a credential.

Responses showed a clear division between those in favor and not in favor of an industry credential in outdoor leadership, which is possibly a representation of how the industry views and treats existing credentials. We noted different perspectives from those identifying as students and young professionals and those identifying as more seasoned professionals (e.g., students/young professionals were generally more in favor). This finding seems to reflect the need among young individuals to demonstrate their experience and validate their knowledge to prospective employers. There might also be a belief that they are more likely to gain employment with credentials. More seasoned professionals might not have the same need to demonstrate their knowledge, as they are either gainfully employed and/or credentials were not required when they entered the workforce. Despite these differences, all participants identified similar issues or challenges with credentialing: the cost of credentials (i.e., time, money) versus the benefit, the difficulty of credentialing qualities that really matter in an outdoor professional, and the sense that there are already too many credentials in the industry.

We should note that the sample was almost exclusively made up of AORE members (198/199), and a majority of those reported working in higher education. This is only a small portion of the professional outdoor industry. More important, the survey did not consider the needs of employers or stakeholders outside the AORE membership. Results may be quite different with a more inclusive sample that includes those who employ outdoor leaders outside higher education (e.g., guides/outfitters, program providers, and other professional organizations). We also note that comparisons of "for" and "against" groups were made more difficult by the variance in questions each group received. Finally, a specific credential was purposefully not developed or explained. The intention of this study was to gather collective input on the need for and receptiveness of the membership to a new, as yet undefined, professional credential.

In conclusion, the results of the survey highlighted a range of perspectives on the purpose, value, and issues associated with the development of an outdoor leadership credential. This seems to reflect the challenges and concerns around developing a meaningful definition of *professional competency* and a professional credential that embodies this definition for such a diverse industry.

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