

AEE WHITE PAPERS



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# Wilderness Orientation Programs

## Introduction

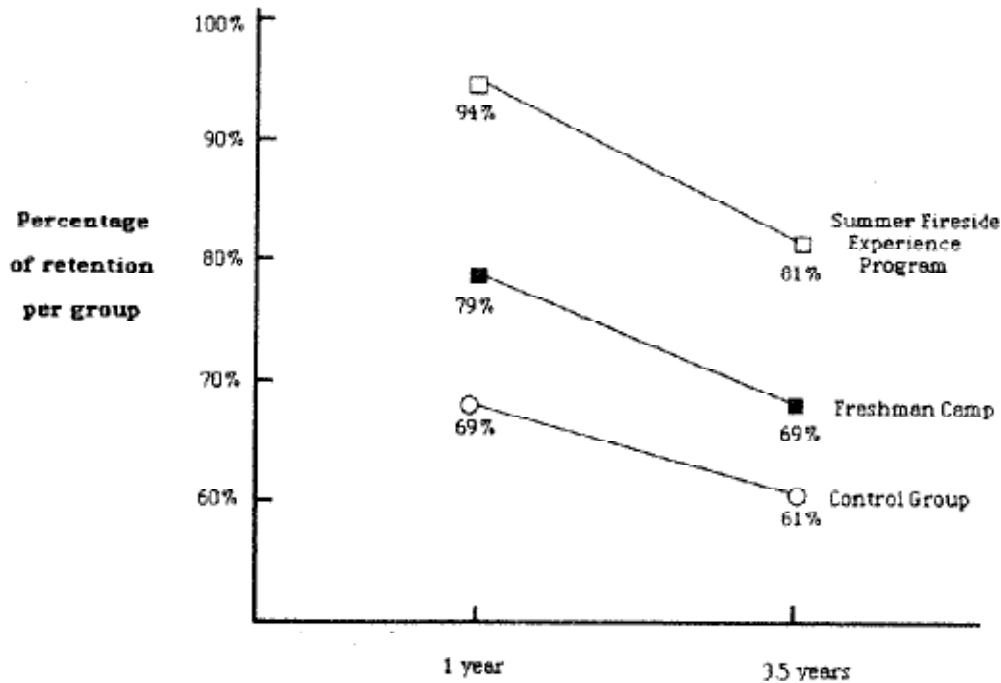
Wilderness orientation programs (sometimes referred to as outdoor orientation programs) use adventure programming for incoming college/university students to aid students' adjustment to college. These experiences usually occur in the days or weeks immediately prior to the first semester of the students' college coursework. They are typically conducted in a multi-day format in outdoor wilderness settings, although some recent versions of these programs have begun to incorporate the use of artificial adventure formats, such as challenge courses, climbing walls, and urban adventure experiences.

## History and Program Prevalence

The first-known wilderness orientation program was conducted by Dartmouth College in 1935. Since that time, particularly with the introduction of Outward Bound concepts in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of wilderness orientation programs at colleges/universities has risen substantially. There are currently at least 164 wilderness orientation programs at four-year colleges and universities across the United States (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010), according to the definition used by these authors (i.e. small groups of 15 or fewer spending at least one overnight away from campus).

## Theoretical Basis

A central premise of most wilderness orientation programs is that they serve as an “unfamiliar environment” where the learning experience can occur and where acquired learning behaviors and coping skills can be transferred and utilized in the students' new higher education experience. Gass (1999) hypothesized that wilderness orientation programs worked, when appropriately conducted, because they (a) assisted in the development of meaningful peer relationships, (b) increased the quantity and quality of faculty and student interaction, (c) aided in the focus of career development and course of study, (d) enhanced students' academic interest, (e) increased students' preparation for college academics, and (f) created a greater compatibility between what was available for students in their college environment and student expectations.



**FIGURE 1**  
**Retention Rates of Students in the Study**

*Note:* From “The Longitudinal Effects of an Adventure Orientation Program,” by M. A. Gass, 1990, *Journal of College Student Development*, 31, pp. 33–38.

### Research

The wilderness orientation program is probably one of the more researched areas in the field of adventure programming. But the research on these programs still remains scant and problematic with regard to addressing internal and external validity issues. To date, only 12 research studies have been conducted regarding some form of demonstrated outcomes as a result of wilderness orientation program participation.

In the most rigorous and controlled study done to date, Gass (1986, 1987, 1990) found that participation in a wilderness orientation program at the University of New Hampshire produced higher retention rates, higher grade averages,

*Wardwell (1999) found WOP participants developed more realistic views of social norms on campus in regard to alcohol use and attending parties.*

and positive changes in specific student development behaviors as compared with peers in another optional active orientation program (i.e., a residential camp setting) as well as with peers that participated in only the required orientation program centering around class

scheduling and familiarity with the campus. This Earlier studies corroborated some of Gass's findings on increased GPA (Stogner, 1978) and student development behaviors (Hansen, 1982). But caution needs to be exercised in generalizing these results, as they are program specific. More recent studies have focused on how wilderness orientation programs (WOPs) affect specific student behaviors and traits. Similar to Gass's findings, Brown (1998) found students who participated in an outdoor orientation program adjusted better to college life and had higher retention rates than students who participated in classroom orientation programs or other alternative orientation programs. Wardwell (1999) found that WOP participants developed more realistic views of social norms on campus in regard to using alcohol and attending parties. Bell (2005) reported higher scores on six factors of social support for wilderness orientation program participants when compared to other pre-orientation experiences, such as service or preseason athletics.

### **Program Variability**

Wilderness orientation programs occur at all types of institutions (public/private, large/small), with no significant patterns of concentration

study has not been replicated on other campuses other than their prevalence at Ivy League colleges. Most programs charge an extra fee for participation (the average is \$51 per day). Although programs share many similarities, some differences do exist in the older and more established programs—that is, older programs tend to be larger, have availability of financial aid, and have formalized relationships with physicians who review wilderness medical practices (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010). These differences are likely due to programs evolving their practices and policies over time.

Bell, Holmes, and Williams (2010) also found that the average wilderness orientation program is optional. The typical WOP is run by a professional director with trained student leaders. The programs generally include activities such as backpacking and initiative games. The average program is five and a half days long and takes place prior to the first day of the semester. They are very similar in program characteristics to the original Dartmouth and Outward Bound models, and similar to the type of wilderness orientation programs reported by Davis-Berman and Berman (1996). In effect, the programs demonstrate a remarkable congruency in organization and operations at four-year colleges within the United States.



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