Outcomes of a Spiritually Focused Wilderness Orientation Program

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Higher education often supports new student transition through various orientation programs. Recently a greater focus on student spiritual growth has emerged as an important aspect. The wilderness orientation program in this study is unique because of its length (12–14 days) and its focus on students’ spiritual development. The purpose of this study was to understand the students’ perceptions of a spiritually focused wilderness orientation program and the influence of their participation in the program during their transition to the college. Data were collected through a post-course essay, the Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire, and a focus group interview. The themes that emerged indicate categories that the students recognized as important: (a) community, (b) developing competence, (c) stewardship, and (d) spiritual growth. These results are helpful in answering some of the questions asked by those involved in traditional student transition programs and those providing wilderness orientation programs.

Keywords: New Student Program, Wilderness Orientation Program, Outdoor Orientation Program, Spiritual Development, Wilderness Experience Program, College Student Development, Spirituality

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Background

For more than three decades, researchers have been studying the conditions that matter in supporting the successful transition and persistence of students to the collegiate environment (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). As first suggested by Sanford (1962, 1967), for students to be successful they must be both challenged with educational experiences that foster learning and personal development and supported by the college environment. Providing the appropriate balance of challenge and support for student success is critical.

A recent movement in higher education has focused on the spiritual formation of students. Higher education has for far too long encouraged the development of fragmented and inauthentic lives by ignoring the “inner” development of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). For institutions to support students as holistic beings in their transition and success, attention must be given through programs and services to both the internal and the external realm of the students’ experience. One common way institutions support student transition is through the use of orientation programs.

Wilderness Orientation Programs

A wilderness orientation program (a type of outdoor orientation program) is defined by Galloway (2000) as “a program designed to assist individuals in adapting to a new environment by using wilderness settings and experiences to facilitate or enhance changes or adaptations to university life” (p. 75). Wilderness orientation programs were first begun at Dartmouth College in 1935, Prescott College in 1968, and Wheaton College in 1969 (Gass, 1986; Wheaton College and HoneyRock Camp, 2002). Bell and colleagues (2010) identified 164 wilderness orientation programs operating “off-campus” for at least one night in the United States. In addition, Bell notes that there were 17,547 incoming first-year students who participated in wilderness orientation programs in 2006 in the United States. It is clear that there is a rise in the use of the wilderness setting, the Outward Bound model, and other innovative techniques to facilitate new student adjustment to the campus environment (Bell, 2006; Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010; Galloway, 2000; Hinton, Twilley, & Mittelstaedt, 2006).

Colleges and universities vary in their purpose for including a wilderness orientation program. Gass (1986) discovered that most schools utilize
wilderness orientation programs (a) to reduce attrition, (b) to ensure a more positive transition to college life, and (c) as a means for introducing the students to the school’s outing club program. Wilderness orientation programs that operate courses longer than seven days are in the minority. Galloway’s (2000) research gleaned information from 89 wilderness orientation programs, and he found that only 12% of these programs were operating courses longer than nine days.

Students’ Spiritual Development and Higher Education

Fostering spiritual growth among college students has gained recent interest as leaders in higher education consider ways in which they can better serve to educate the “whole person” (Astin, 2004; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2004, 2011; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Lindholm, 2006). Recent research has identified that college students often struggle with their own religious beliefs as they begin their college career (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). In a recent national study of college students and their search for meaning and purpose, Astin et al. (2004) state, “We have increasingly come to neglect the student’s inner development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding” (p. 1). Furthermore, they state, “To ignore the spiritual side of students’ and faculty’s lives is to encourage a kind of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity, where students and faculty act as if they are not spiritual beings, or as if their spiritual side is irrelevant to their vocation or work” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 7).

Students’ Spiritual Development and Wilderness Orientation Programs

Within the field of experiential education and more specifically adventure programming, spirituality, spiritual growth, spiritual education, and related areas of study have been gaining recognition in both program design and research literature (Anderson-Hanley, 1997; Daniel, 2003; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Haluza-Delay; 2000; Hitzhusen, 2004; Stringer & McAvo, 1992). Hitzhusen (2004) noted that there seems to be a postmodern openness to the realm of spirituality, and this has contributed to it being acceptable for many outdoor education and wilderness experience programs to explicitly include attention to spirituality in their program focus. Yet spirituality has very different meanings within the outdoor and adventure education literature. Because spirituality is not attached to any particular religion, it can be described in nonreligious terms. Hitzhusen (2004) states the following:

In this general sense, spirituality is sometimes understood as the far end of the affective domain, or perhaps as a domain unto itself (the spiritual domain). It can involve transcendence, ineffability, mystery, feelings “deep in one’s soul,” beauty, goodness, contemplation, a sense of inspiration or
renewal, encounter with sublime natural settings, and intuition of the divine; it is often characterized by a sense of awe, unity, personal balance, or inner peace. (p. 41)

The outdoors has often been a place where people of all backgrounds have gazed in awe over a lakeshore or high mountain vista—many times connecting their experience in nature with God, a higher power, or a heightened awareness of one’s own place in this vast universe. Individuals are often unable to describe what has happened during this outdoor experience. James (1902) identified four characteristics of the spiritual experience:

- Ineffability—inability to describe the experience
- Noesis—receiving knowledge in a spontaneous fashion
- Transiency—the phenomenon is temporary
- Passivity—the individual lacks control over what is happening

These characteristics of a “spiritual” experience are similar to those noted by other scholars, but it is important to identify that one may not describe his or her spiritual experience in nature in terms of a particular religious belief system. Some wilderness experiences, like the Wilderness Journey for First Year Students (WJFYS) program, may be interpreted in the context of a specific religious belief system—especially if these programs were framed as such beforehand. It may be best to qualify “spirituality” in the context of this study of a spiritually focused outdoor orientation program within Christian theology—meaning a religious spirituality that involves a relationship with God, spiritual practices or disciplines, scriptural texts, and spiritual directors (pastors, priests, etc.). The WJFYS program intentionally utilizes the wilderness setting as a catalyst to promote participants’ exploration of their own belief systems in light of the Christian faith tradition.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the students’ perceptions of a spiritually focused wilderness orientation program and to learn how their participation in the program influenced their transition to college and their spiritual formation. Further research seemed warranted given the increase in campus initiatives aimed at supporting new student transition through orientation programs, the emphasis on examining student spiritual formation, and the increased focus on the use of extended wilderness programming for new students. This exploratory study was intended to uncover the meaning of such wilderness experiences through the student’s perspective.
Method

Within a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2007), this investigation utilized a mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) as a means of combining qualitative and quantitative methods for exploring students’ perceptions of their experience and the impact of participation on transition to college and spiritual growth. The qualitative methods remained the dominant means of inquiry for providing insight into the participant’s experience. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the study was not informed by a theoretical framework a priori, but rather the framework was “generated or ‘grounded’ in data from the participants who have experienced the process” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63).

Program and Participants

The WJFYS program was begun in 2006 and offered as an academic course, Outdoor Education: 181, for two credits at Montreat College in North Carolina, United States. Montreat College is a small Christian liberal arts college serving approximately 450 students on its main campus and 750 students in an adult education program. The course was open to any incoming student who was physically able to participate and had met the application deadline. The WJFYS expedition was composed of a small group of 11 participants, and its format was modeled after the classic Outward Bound course. It had an explicit focus on student development in the areas of Christian discipleship, leadership, service, and stewardship. There are many program components (see Table 1) that interact to provide an environment that supports change in the lives of students. The WJFYS program

| Table 1 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| **Typical WJFYS Sequence of Program Components** |                  |
| Program component | Length |
| Welcome luncheon for families | ½ day |
| Backpacking expedition with instructors | 5–9 days |
| Flat-water canoeing expedition | 2–3 days |
| Solo experience | 1–2 days |
| Final expedition with or without instructors | 1–3 days |
| Final personal challenge | 14-mile run |
| Large group (all WJFYS students) celebration | ½ day |
| Post-course reflection paper | Submitted 1 month post-course |
| Monthly WJFYS gatherings | 1 evening/month—fall semester |
is unique in its design because of its length (12–14 days) and its overt focus
on the use of the wilderness as a catalyst for Christian spiritual develop-
ment in the lives of its participants. Program components include back-
country travel and camping, a canoeing expedition, a solo experience, a
small group expedition, and a personal challenge event (see Table 1). The
overt spiritual development focus of the program is accomplished through
a variety of program methods (see Table 2).

Once accepted, students are provided with pre-course materials
(including required course reading and a personal clothing list) to assist in
their preparation for their expedition. The students arrive on campus 12
days prior to the regular New Student Orientation in which all new stu-
dents participate. The WJFYS program model is designed to offer upper-
class students an opportunity to serve in a leadership role alongside a staff
or faculty member of the college. In the WJFYS program, the environment,
instructors, and participants play a unique role in creating a learning
environment that contributes toward change in the individual and group
(see Table 3).

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**Table 2**

*Methods Used to Facilitate Spiritual Growth During the WJFYS Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-course readings</td>
<td>Readings provide topics for discussion during expedition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>Personal and group study, reflection, and inspiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Individual and corporate prayer time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedition readings</td>
<td>Poems, quotes, short stories used for inspiration or discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>Group singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors</td>
<td>Parallels that illustrate characteristics of the Christian life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals</td>
<td>Personal journal used for recording significant events and reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group covenants</td>
<td>Group commitment similar to those found in the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>Instructor’s example of the Christian faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>Processing times for reflective questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet times/“mini solos”</td>
<td>Personal time for reflection, journaling, meditation, singing, prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life stories</td>
<td>Students share key experiences in their life that have shaped them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WJFYS Program Elements That Support Change in Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasting setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity of living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving with real consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpredictable environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition of testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from *What We Think We Have Learned About Change in One College Outward Bound Adaptive Program*, by B. Williams and K. R. Kalisch, 1995. Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education, Lake Geneva, WI.

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants for this study (Patton, 2002). The WJFYS students were selected based on the following criteria: (a) new student to the college, (b) participation in the WJFYS program, and (c) completion of New Student Orientation. A total of 11 students were eligible to participate. Of the 11 eligible students, all 11 chose to participate. The group was comprised of eight males and three females. In addition, during one phase of data collection a control group of students was established from the random selection of a New Student Seminar course offered during the fall semester. The control group of students was selected based on the following criteria: (a) new student to the college, (b) did not participate in the WJFYS program, and (c) completion of New Student Orientation. A total of 12 students were eligible to participate in the control group. Of the 12 students, six male and three female students chose to participate for a control group of nine. Signed consent forms were received from all
participants, participation in both groups was voluntary, and students were not compensated for their participation.

Data Collection

This study employed three phases of data collection. Phase one included a three- to five-page essay written by the students one month after the expedition. Phase two involved administering the Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire (SACQ) to the WJFYS students and to the control group of students one month after the start of the fall semester. Phase three was a focus group interview conducted with the WJFYS students at the end of their first semester at the college.

Student essays. One month following the wilderness expedition each participant submitted an essay focused on areas of personal growth as a result of participating in the expedition and the impact of this growth on their transition to college. Students were asked to think about their experience in the wilderness and organize their essay to answer the following questions: (a) What happened out there in the wilderness? (b) What did you observe or experience regarding your own character, your relationships with others, your relationship with God and His creation? (c) What does your experience mean to you as you transition to life on campus and how can you apply what you have learned?

Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire. The Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire was used as a preliminary tool to gain insight into the students’ adjustment and any areas of difference between the students who attended the WJFYS course (n = 11) and the control group of students (n = 9). The results from the SACQ were not intended to be interpreted alone, but were used to highlight areas of further inquiry for the focus group interview conducted at the end of the semester.

The SACQ is designed to assess how well a student perceives he or she is adjusting to college (Baker & Siryk, 1989). The SACQ is a 67-item, self-report questionnaire that can be administered individually or to groups and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Each item of the questionnaire alludes to one of the many facets of adjusting to college and, either explicitly or implicitly, to how the student is coping with that demand. The SACQ is divided into four principal subscales: Academic Adjustment (24 items), Social Adjustment (20 items), Personal-Emotional Adjustment (15 items), and Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment (15 items). There are 67 total, unique items; some of which are used in multiple subscales in the SACQ. Each SACQ item is a statement that the student responds to on a 9-point scale ranging from “applies very closely to me” on the left to “doesn’t apply to me at all” on the right. The sum of the individual item scores for each subscale constitutes an index for each of the four aspects of adjustment. The sum of scores for all 67 items—the Full Scale score—is an index of overall adjustment.
The higher the score, the better the adjustment. For information about the development and psychometric properties of the SACQ, see Baker and Siryk (1989).

Focus group interviews. A focus group interview \( (n = 11) \) was conducted three months following the expedition with the students who attended the WJFYS course in order to better understand the influence of the wilderness orientation program. A semi-structured format was used for the focus groups with a mixture of open-ended and semi-structured questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). The researchers followed an “interview guide” method for compiling the questions and facilitating the interviews (Patton, 2002). The focus group interviews further enhanced the survey and essay data by providing a format for the participants to share their perceptions of the WJFYS program three months after leaving the wilderness environment (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Data Analysis

Student Adaptations to College Questionnaire data. Data collected from the SACQ were analyzed in two stages. In the first stage the data were explored with descriptive statistics and tested for normality. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each subscale and the Full Scale (see Table 4). Each subscale and the Full Scale were tested for normality using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. In the second stage, the independent \( t \) test was used to test for significant differences between the WJFYS students and the control group on each of the subscales and the Full Scale.

Student essay and focus group data. Throughout the qualitative data analysis, elements of the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) served as a guide, whereby emerging themes were constantly compared with new data being analyzed. Specifically, the data analysis process followed the steps outlined in part by Tesch (1990) and Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996), which assisted the researchers in the reduction and interpretation of the text (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Each phase of the qualitative data analysis followed the following steps. During the first step, the “big ideas” (Vaughn et al., 1996) that emerged from each piece of text were summarized by the researchers. In the second step, individual data units were identified that consisted of the smallest piece of information that was informative by itself. Next, similar data units or appropriate sections of text were coded. The fourth step required the researchers to check their codes for consistency and examine emerging themes for gender-related patterns. Because no consistent gender-specific patterns were detected, the remaining data analysis was conducted without consideration of gender. Finally, the researchers revisited
the “big ideas” identified in step one and compared the initial impressions with the thematic categories identified in step four and the survey (SACQ) results. This assisted in the process of interpreting the categories and refining the themes. Participant comments were then selected to serve as examples in support of each theme. The results indicate the dominant themes that emerged across the essays and the focus group interview.

**Establishing Trustworthiness**

Triangulation of data, member checks, and peer debriefing were used to establish trustworthiness of the results as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Triangulation of data from essays, surveys, and interviews support the findings of the study. In addition, the data were analyzed independently by two primary investigators and corroborated by a third investigator. One of the primary investigators and the third investigator had no direct relationship or prior association with the participants. Member checks were conducted with participants to confirm the accuracy of transcripts following the focus group interview prior to data analysis. Finally, peer examination was conducted throughout the data analysis and theme identification process as findings of the study were discussed with college administrators and faculty.

**Limitations**

This study is limited in generalizability due to the focus of the study on one program and the small number of participants. In general, the knowledge claims resulting from this study, although limited in generalizability, are high in certainty (Seashore, 2008). Given that the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how the WJFYS program impacted students’ transition to college, a high degree of certainty was desired. Because one of the data sources of the study (student essays) was a graded portion of the WJFYS course, care was taken to ensure two additional sources of data (survey and focus group) were not graded or formal components of an academic course.

**Results**

For SACQ data, means and standard deviations for each subscale and the Full Scale are presented in Table 4. Each subscale and the Full Scale was tested for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests with the results for each subscale and Full Scale indicating the distribution of the sample is not significantly different from a normal distribution. A review of the means revealed that WJFYS students scored higher on the tool in total and in each of the four subscales. WJFYS students performed significantly higher on the Full Scale, \( t(18) = 3.00, p = .008 \), and on three of the four subscales: Social Adjustment, \( t(11.50) = 3.70, p = .003 \); Personal-Emotional Adjustment, \( t(16.24) = 3.45, p = .003 \); and
Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment, \( t(12.48) = 2.98, p = .011 \) (see Table 5). Although the WJFYS students scored higher on the Academic Adjustment subscale, the difference was not significant.

### Table 4
**SACQ Means and Standard Deviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Mean Wilderness</th>
<th>Mean Control</th>
<th>Standard deviations Wilderness</th>
<th>Standard deviations Control</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Adjustment</td>
<td>153.20</td>
<td>134.09</td>
<td>16.30</td>
<td>25.90</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Adjustment</td>
<td>150.56</td>
<td>126.64</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>20.66</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal-Emotional Adjustment</td>
<td>106.00</td>
<td>79.00</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>21.98</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment</td>
<td>115.89</td>
<td>94.73</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>22.16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Adjustment Full Scale</td>
<td>470.22</td>
<td>390.36</td>
<td>39.30</td>
<td>71.22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5
**SACQ Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>5.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.003**</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal-Emotional Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness</td>
<td>16.24</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.003**</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness</td>
<td>12.48</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.011*</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Adjustment Full Scale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.008**</td>
<td>13.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\( p < .05 \). ** \( p < .01 \), two-tailed.
The qualitative essay and focus group data are presented according to the themes that emerged and are followed by representative quotes that support each theme. Some themes warranted the inclusion of sub-themes, which are also noted (see Table 6).

Table 6  
Qualitative Data Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Established-authentic community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing competence</td>
<td>Interpersonal competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall sense of competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Responsibility to care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual development</td>
<td>Increased trust in God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased communion with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased awareness of God’s character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased awareness of one’s personal faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment that supports faith development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Community**

Throughout the Wilderness Journey, the relationships established among participants played a critical role in the development of a sense of community. Reflecting on their Wilderness Journey experience, the topic of community emerged with an emphasis on established-authentic community and social adjustment.

*Established-authentic community.* Community was frequently cited when the participants reflected upon their Wilderness Journey experience. They shared that the trip enabled them to develop a strong bond with the other participants. When reflecting on the trip’s activities, the participants spoke of the value of the relationships established:

*I developed great relationships with others over the course of the trip as well. We all shared our life stories, and developed an intense community.*

The participants also shared how important the new relationships were in their matriculation through college and how they believed the new relationships would continue to blossom:

*I also found some new friends to help me make it through the school year. I know that spending 12 days with 13 people makes all of you very*
close. Even now, as I see them around campus I will at least wave, if not stop to talk to them. I know I can count on all those people if I need someone to talk to or just someone to sit next to in the cafeteria or in classes.

Social adjustment. Issues related to social adjustment were identified several times by the participants. Most of the participants identified that the Wilderness Journey was an opportunity to transition from home to college life. One student reflected on what life might have been like during this transition had she not completed the program:

I know for me . . . it is very hard for me to make friends 'cause I am totally shy, once I get to know people I am not so bad, but I will not go up to a stranger and start a conversation. So it would be really hard for me try and find friends.

Developing Competence

The Wilderness Journey provided an opportunity for students to gain skills and confidence.

Interpersonal competence. The WJFYS program provided an opportunity for students to develop skills in communicating and collaborating with others. In particular, through the Wilderness Journey experience several students identified growth in their ability to self-disclose information about themselves with peers. For example, one student shared the following:

Even though I was clueless and self-conscious at the beginning of the trip, this soon subsided. I realized that first morning . . . when everybody shared their life stories it made me realize that I’m not so abnormal after all, and don’t have to hide who I really am. I think that helped me to open up, and when it got to be my turn to share, I felt almost no awkwardness.

In addition to supporting the ability to self-disclose, the program also provided an opportunity for students to strengthen group leadership skills:

Through Wilderness Journey, there was a change in myself. I rose up to the task of leading, no longer afraid. When I was the leader of the day, I enjoyed being in the leadership role, feeling capable of facilitating the group in the day’s tasks. These changes in me were eye-opening and exciting.
Overall sense of competence. The students identified that they developed a greater sense of confidence in their ability to cope with whatever might happen. After the Wilderness Journey, one student indicated this through the following comment:

*I have a little more faith than I had before this trip. I figure if I could survive those 12 days, then college is going to be a breeze.*

Another student commented, *“What most of all has impacted me from the wilderness trip connects with a confidence in my abilities.”* A third student shared, *“I now am physically stronger, but also mentally stronger. I can endure more before I begin to lose grip.”* One student attributed the increase in overall sense of competence to the elements of the wilderness experience:

*The trip taught me to be tough when I could not be strong. I learned to endure when I could not conquer. When the trail became more than I could handle and quitting was an enticing offer, I had to press on.*

**Stewardship—Responsibility to Care**

Students indicated that the program often forced them to think beyond themselves and their own needs. This “responsibility to care” often manifested itself in a desire to help others and to take care of the natural environment in which they were traveling. One student shared the following at the end of the course:

*Over the past couple of weeks, I have found, almost to my surprise, that I tend to be very helpful to others. If my memory serves me correctly, I count four different times over the past week in which I have sacrificed my own time to help somebody.*

**Spiritual Development**

Given the student population, the purpose of the program, and the intentional programming (see Table 2) on the part of the instructors to openly discuss the spiritual issues of the students throughout the course, it is no surprise that one of the most predominate themes that emerged from the data was personal spiritual development. This theme was the most often referenced and the one with the most sub-themes: (a) increased trust in God, (b) increased communion with God, (c) increased awareness of God’s character, (d) increased awareness of one’s personal faith, and (e) environment that supports faith development.
Increased trust in God. As the students journeyed through the wilderness, they were faced with many situations in which they were challenged (mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually) and realized that they could not be successful on their own power. Reflecting after the course, one student stated the following:

As I am reflecting on the journey, I start to think about the “me” before the journey and the “me” after the journey. Physically I have not changed that much, but spiritually I have been redone. I have been faced with a difficult problem and I have turned to God instead of turning to myself to solve the problem. Usually, if I am faced with a problem, I will try and solve it for myself. If I cannot fix the problem by myself, then I will call on God. I now know that I need to call on God first and not last. He is the creator of all things and he knows the problems I will face before I face them.

Increased communion with God. The students also mentioned that the Wilderness Journey experience, and particularly the remote wilderness setting, promoted an increased ability to “commune” with God through prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and reflection. One student mentioned how this communion has been since returning to campus:

It is sometimes hard to get the feeling of intimacy with him [God] that I had when all distractions were removed, but it is still there when I forget everything and call on Him.

Increased awareness of God’s character. Many students spoke about the effect of both the wilderness setting and the intentional programming (pre-course readings, personal reflection time, group discussions, etc.) on their increased awareness of God’s character, as shown by this student’s comment:

One of the very first things we had to do as part of the Wilderness Journey was to spend personal time with God and then spend time in prayer with one of the other members in the Wilderness Journey group. This time of personal reflection set the standard for the rest of the journey. This trip was not just a simple trek in the woods but a journey to find God on a personal level.

Increased awareness of one’s personal faith. Reflecting on their experience in the wilderness, many students talked about how they were more aware of and “owned” their personal faith in God. The experience
offered many students an opportunity to wrestle with what they believe as they were faced with a major life transition beginning their first year at college. One student shared the following:

*Before I go on, there is something that must be said. I was never a really spiritual person. I mean, I did go to church and I did believe in God, but I always had my questions as to why things went the way they did. But as this trip progressed, those questions were slowly erased from my mind.*

**Environment that supports faith development.** Many of the earlier spiritual development themes indicate the role that the environment played on the students’ ability to focus on their personal faith and spend time in quiet contemplation. This environmental component was discussed in the context of the natural surroundings, the simplicity of daily living, and the supportive community of peers and instructors. At the conclusion of the course, one student summarized the impact of many of the environmental conditions on his ability to grow spiritually:

*Living for 11 days in God’s creation with almost no connection to the outside world gave me a new perspective on life. When we had nothing to worry about but the bare necessities of survival, it seemed to make life simpler. It was easier to commune with God when the rush of life had been removed. Now that I am back in civilization, I have many distractions that I didn’t have in the woods. Classes, study time, playing foosball until 2 AM, the internet, music, telephones, and even a social life can all take time away so fast that when there is none left, I wonder where it went. In the woods, we only had to worry about surviving and getting from one place to the next. That left a lot more time for prayer and meditation, as well as allowing us to slow down and have a break from normal life. The trip helped me to focus on what is really important to me: God.*

The Wilderness Journey clearly impacted the personal development of these students as they transitioned to college. These results are from one program and with a small sample, and any generalizations to other first-year college student populations should be made with caution. However, the results do provide findings that are insightful for those interested in new student success and the use of wilderness orientation programs for spiritual growth.
Discussion

This study provides insight into the experiences of new students participating in a spiritually oriented wilderness orientation program. The results are meaningful for those involved in the administration of similar programs and those interested in enhancing opportunities for the spiritual growth and development of college students. The themes that emerged from this study (as shown in Table 6) indicate four overarching categories that the students recognized as important and related to their experience. The categories include (a) community, (b) developing competence, (c) stewardship, and (d) spiritual development.

Community

The first category, community, is supported by the themes of established-authentic community and social adjustment as well as by the results from the SACQ Social Adjustment and Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment subscales. The most powerful influence on a college student’s experience is the student’s peer group (Astin, 1993). In recognition of the impact of adventure activities on the development of meaningful peer relationships, Gass (1999) states, “Adventure activities, especially those that are conducted in small groups, are extremely well-suited to nurturing the formation of positive peer group development with incoming students” (p. 375). The students’ intense experience provided an opportunity to forge deep trusting relationships that support their success in the wilderness as well as in their transition into daily campus life.

Developing Competence

The second category of developing competence is supported by the themes of developing an overall sense of competence and interpersonal competence, in addition to results from the SACQ Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale. Students commented on the development of self-trust and self-confidence as well as the ability to share and lead within a group setting. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe the development of competence through a pitchfork metaphor:

> Competence is a three-tined pitchfork. Intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence are the tines. . . . A sense of competence stems from the confidence that one can cope with what comes and achieve goals successfully. (p. 53)

The students describe their experience in the WJFYS program as helping them develop competence. In particular, the students mentioned developing faith in oneself, examining their ability to endure hardship, and
discovering their ability to lead. Through the merging of these experiences, 
students discussed gaining a general confidence that supports their ability 
to overcome future challenges.

**Stewardship**

The third category, stewardship, or a “responsibility to care,” was 
expressed by the students with particular attention given to the importance 
of relationships. They expressed an increased awareness of those relation-
ships that were formational both in their life at home and with their new 
peer group. The heightened awareness afforded by an extended experience 
in the wilderness is not unique to this program. Hendee and Brown (1988) 
posit that the wilderness experience provides an increased opportunity for 
change and attunement. The students in the WJFYS program clearly iden-
tified that they were more aware and appreciative of the relationships they 
had with family, friends, and their new peer group. These results also sup-
port the findings of Vlamis’s (2002) study, which found an increase in the 
development of and importance placed on relationships within the first-
year student’s peer group. The stewardship of relationships both during the 
expedition and afterward clearly affected the quality of the students’ tran-
sition to college.

**Spiritual Development**

The category most often mentioned throughout all phases of data col-
lection was spiritual development. This development was further identi-
fied as (a) an increased trust in God, (b) an increased communion with God, 
(c) an increased awareness of God’s character, (d) an increased awareness of 
one’s personal faith, and (e) an environment that supported faith develop-
ment. The WJFYS program and its various components are intentionally 
facilitated with the primary purpose of encouraging students to strengthen 
their understanding of who they are, who God is, and their relationship with 
God. The findings of this study support the characteristics often conducive 
to spiritual development: (a) emphasis on addressing intrapersonal ques-
tions (e.g., Who am I?), (b) immediacy and significance of consequence for 
choosing and acting on values, and (c) creation of space for practical ex-
ploration of ideals and values with opportunities for follow-up experience 
(Fox, 1999; McGowen, 2000). This study confirms earlier findings that small 
group experiences in the wilderness can be a catalyst for spiritual develop-
ment in the lives of participants (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992) and further 
reinforces the recent attention given to the interest of college students in 
exploring the spiritual dimension of life (Astin et al., 2004, 2011).

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study provides insight into the experiences of new college stu-
dents who participated in a spiritually focused wilderness orientation
program. The results are meaningful in answering some of the questions asked by both those involved in traditional first-year student transition programs and those providing wilderness orientation programs focused on the spiritual growth and development of college students. The following are a few recommendations for further practice and research.

**Recommendations for Practice**

1. The removal of distractions was instrumental in the students’ ability to reflect on the spiritual dimension of their life. Colleges and universities might consider strategies to reduce distractions and encourage regular reflection during life on campus.

2. The natural world is clearly a powerful setting in which to explore life’s larger questions, including the role of spirituality and faith in one’s life. College student orientation programs may wish to consider how to involve short-term experiences in the outdoors as a part of student transition programs.

3. Orientation programs might consider the use of small group experiences that require problem solving and teamwork within an authentic environment to enhance students’ ability to make connections with their peer group and the academic institution.

**Recommendations for Research**

1. College student social development and academic performance are interrelated. To further explore the effects of participation in wilderness orientation programs on academic performance, similar studies should be done highlighting longitudinal academic implications.

2. More longitudinal studies comparing two cohorts of new students—one cohort participating in traditional orientation programs and the other in a wilderness orientation program—for program implications on student persistence and degree completion would offer relevant research on best practices for the retention of college students.

3. Further research investigating the qualities of experience, both in the wilderness and the urban environment, that contribute to spiritual growth among young people would lend further insight into this often unexplored domain of human life.
References


Williams, B., & Kalisch, K. R. (1995, November). What we think we have learned about change in one college Outward Bound adaptive program. Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education, Lake Geneva, WI.