

Student Success through Outdoor Orientation Programs

Andrew Hill, Instructor, Recreation Management
Appalachian State University
Hillac3@appstate.edu
P.O. Box 32181
Boone, NC 28608

Dr. Catherine Clark, Associate Professor, College Student Development
Appalachian State University
Clarkcr@appstate.edu

Dave Erbe, Outward Bound Instructor
Outward Bound
erbede@appstate.edu

Dr. Diane Waryold, Professor, College Student Development
Appalachian State University
waryolddm@appstate.edu

Student Success through Outdoor Orientation Programs

Abstract

Outdoor orientation programs have a significant impact on student success in college. These programs foster a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, trust, interpersonal skills and community engagement ideals critical for student development in higher education. This mixed-methods study compares First Ascent, an outdoor orientation program, with a required academic orientation program and evaluates why students participate in First Ascent, how First Ascent participants' GPA and retention rates compare to the academic orientation program, and the perceived outcomes of both orientation program types. Results of this study can be used to support the value of outdoor orientation programs and how these programs can lead to student success in college.

Keywords: Outdoor orientation, student success, retention

Introduction

Orientation programs are an integral part of most college students' first year experience. With the average retention rate in 2014 of a first year BA/BS students at public universities being 64.2% (ACT, 2014) and the graduation rate of the same population being 36.5% (ACT, 2014), it is critical that colleges and universities evaluate how they can retain students and help them gain the skills they need to earn a degree. A student's orientation experience is a critical point in their college experience because it is the first chance that staff, faculty, and fellow students have to help guide new students and prepare them for the challenges they will face in college. Student success is critical in understanding and assessing how to help these young adults get the most out of their experience in college.

Academic orientation programs can be traced back to Harvard in the late 1880's when students, and eventually faculty, supported incoming students, and assisted them in their transition to college (CAS, 2009). Since the development of these transition experiences, orientation programs have been changing to meet the needs of college students (CAS, 2009). Currently, orientation programs are available at all accredited colleges in the United States (Bell, Gass, Nafziger, & Starbuck, 2014). Modern orientation programs are designed to introduce prospective students to the campus culture and traditions, promote confidence among students/parents and help students transition into the college environment through programming and activities (Robinson, Burns & Gaw, 1996). Orientation programs play a critical role in reducing student stress throughout the transition process, helping students find a sense of place within the university community, increasing students' affinity towards the university, and improving retention rates throughout the first year of college (Robinson, Burns & Gaw, 1996).

Outdoor orientation programs are an example of an experiential based orientation program, designed to introduce and prepare incoming students to the campus community through outdoor recreation (Bell & Starbuck, 2013). These programs vary in structure and type from week-long wilderness expeditions to a weekend basecamp model (Bell, Gass & Vlamis, 2011). Most programs involve adventure and team building activities in a wilderness setting along with discussion and reflection on challenges that confront students as they transition to college (Bell et al., 2011). These programs typically utilize adventure experiences such as backpacking and wilderness travel to facilitate a fluid transition for students entering college (Bell et al., 2014). Participants learn important leadership skills and develop a deeper understanding of group dynamics. (Frauman & Waryold, 2009). They often learn more about themselves through understanding their place in a group. Outdoor orientation programs are designed to meet the needs of an often self-selecting population who want to challenge themselves and meet like-minded students who share the struggles of the first year experience.

As a student enters college, they enter the beginning stage of the transition experience. Orientation programs help improve student success through specific programming, preparing students for college life and the struggles that await them throughout their college career. Outdoor orientation programs use the unique outdoor environment to develop students in ways that are different from the standard, academic orientation program. This study will compare the required academic orientation program at an institution with the outdoor orientation program referred to as First Ascent. They will be compared using specific CAS standards to determine effectiveness and outcomes related to measuring student success in areas such as GPA, retention rates and satisfaction. Through addressing these outcomes in a satisfaction survey and focus

groups, researchers plan to better understand the student transition experience and how to better prepare students for college.

Purpose of Study

With the research done on outdoor orientation programs, there is still a need to further explore the specific impacts of outdoor orientation programs when compared to a standard required academic orientation program. The purpose of this study is to compare the learning outcomes of students who participated in First Ascent and compare them to the outcomes of an academic orientation program. These outcomes will be assessed by measuring the experiences with the CAS standards for orientation programs outlined below. This study will look at both the experiences students have within their orientation program as well as how their environment promotes or detracts from intrapersonal development and interpersonal development as influenced by participation in the academic orientation program and First Ascent. This study will also look at the relationship between participant and facilitator to determine the role that mentorship plays in the college transition experience.

Review of Literature

The primary goal of college student orientation programs is to promote student success. Student success can be defined as academic achievement, personal (both interpersonal and intrapersonal) development, student engagement and student self-efficacy. Orientation programs with a focus on developing students' interpersonal skills can help students transfer success to other areas of their college experience such as academic excellence, the formation of healthy relationships and campus involvement. Astin places great emphasis on student involvement. Barefoot and Gardner (1993) support that programs which increase student involvement, social integration of students and a sense of community can increase new student success. Tinto

(1988) maintained that social relationships are a crucial way that students make meaning of their experience and become integrated into college life.

Integrating new students into a new campus culture and environment has challenges. Students embrace and adapt to a new campus culture while developing new relationships. Boyer (1987) noted that "new students have little sense of being inducted into a community whose structure, privileges and responsibilities have been evolving for almost a millennium" (p. 43). Boyer researched these challenges and identified orientation programs as a potential solution. Boyer stated that, "A successful freshman year program will convince students that they are part of an intellectually vital, caring community" (1987, p. 57).

McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne (1989) identified interpersonal success as a key factor in student retention and success. Interpersonal success involves the communication and social skills students bring to campus as well as the continued development of interpersonal skills during their time at the university. Research supports that students with more highly developed interpersonal skills will persist and graduate at a much higher rate than students with less developed interpersonal skills (McCroskey, et.al 1989). Outdoor orientation programs offer significant opportunities to develop and strengthen interpersonal skills.

Student Development through Outdoor Orientation Programs

The growth of outdoor orientation programs coincided with a national boom in outdoor recreation during which the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and Outward Bound (OB) Program rose to prominence in outdoor education (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010). Many of these programs grew out of, or were directly influenced by, OB and NOLS curriculum (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010). Since the development of outdoor orientation programs in

colleges and universities, these programs have been growing and changing to meet the needs of the current incoming students (Bell, B. J., & Starbuck, D. 2013).

As Bell et al. outlined, outdoor orientation programs are an important area of experiential education with over 25,000 participants annually (2014). In a study looking at all the research done in the past on outdoor orientation programs, Bell et al. conducted research into the state of knowledge of outdoor orientation programs and reviewed over 25 studies and dissertations (2014). In the outdoor orientation program literature, over 20 variables have been studied (Bell, et al., 2014). These variables include college retention, GPA, student adjustment to college, student development task inventory, satisfaction, friendship formation, social support, student fears, self-efficacy, leadership, sense of place, sense of community, life effectiveness, self-concept, value, and environmental preference (Bell, et al., 2014). They concluded that outdoor orientation programs foster a sense of belonging and provide experiences that support healthy peer connections that undermine status differences (Bell, et al., 2014).

Bell, et. al (2014) offered an overview of peer reviewed research of outdoor orientation programs and a theoretical model of how outdoor orientation programs bring about positive change (2014). This research proves invaluable in assessing the current state of outdoor orientation programs and determining best practices for Appalachian State University's First Ascent Program.

Of the many studies done on outdoor orientation programs, some have isolated key outcomes that set outdoor orientation programs apart from the standard academic orientation program. Brown (1998) found that an outdoor orientation program at a Mid-Atlantic university had higher retention rates and adjustment rates in participants when compared to the schools alternative and traditional orientation programs Austin, Martin, Yoshino, Schanning, Ogle &

Mittelstaedt, 2010 found that outdoor orientation programs have a positive impact on incoming students' sense of place and community and that the two are linked. One weakness of this study was that the outdoor orientation program outcomes were not compared to the outcomes of a non-outdoor based orientation. Bell and Holmes specifically addressed this limitation in a study in 2011. , "The adventure setting appeared to foster increased trust among participants" (Bell & Holmes, 2011). The essays outlined overall success attributed to four factors: trip setting, group size, participants, and peer leadership (Bell & Holmes, 2011). Wolfe and Kay (2011) identified four factors that led to improved retention rates; social integration, physical activity, significant positive interactions with faculty, and preparation for university life. In a study of an OOP. They positive effects on participants' knowledge of self, preparation for university life, attitudes toward the university and social relationships (Wolfe & Kay, 2011).

Frauman and Waryold (2009) identified key outcomes by gathering data identifying perceived life effectiveness. This research highlighted student's self-perceived growth in areas such as time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, task leadership, emotional control, active initiative and self-confidence (Frauman & Waryold, 2009). This research reinforces previous findings proving the benefits of experiential programs on the educational and emotional growth of college students who participate in outdoor orientation programs. Additional research on First Ascent conducted by Waryold and James (2010) discovered developmental themes of interpersonal development, intrapersonal development, and a positive outlook on the natural world. OPP have many positive impacts; primarily due to the special social situation the programs create among peer groups that impact both incoming students and student leaders. The focus of the curriculum, though, influences which positive outcomes students report (Bell, et al. 2014). With the many different variations

of orientation programs, it is critical that the national standards for orientation programs are understood and integral in program development.

The Role of Orientation Program: CAS Standards

CAS states that the mission of orientation programs is to, “Facilitate student transition into an institution, prepare students for opportunities and responsibilities, integrate students into the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution, and contribute to retention,” (2009, p. 324). Furthermore, orientation programs must program to address, “Student learning and development outcomes including knowledge acquisition/application, cognitive complexity, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, civic engagement, and practical competence,” (CAS, 2009, p. 324).

According to the CAS standards (2009),

“orientation programs must be: Integrated into the life of the institution, intentional and coherent, guided by theories and knowledge of learning and development, reflective of developmental and demographic profiles of the student population, and responsive to the needs of individuals.” (p. 324).

Orientation programs must also take into account factors including, diversity, equity, access, proper relations, financial resources, technology, equipment, assessment and evaluation (CAS, 2009, p. 326-329). Institutions can use these standards as a guideline when developing and adjusting orientation program goals, activities, curriculum, and logistics to ensure that they are programming within the scope of the higher education standards.

Overview of ASU’s Academic Orientation Program

The Appalachian State University academic orientation program is a required program for all incoming students, both freshman and transfer (Orientation, 2015). The stated goals of the

academic orientation program are to help students get a feel for campus, meet with an advisor and faculty, and complete their registration for fall classes (Orientation, 2015). The freshman orientation program is a 2-day program while the transfer student orientation program is only a 1-day program. To complement the mandatory orientation program, students may also choose to register for First Ascent, a 4-5 day wilderness based outdoor orientation program (Orientation, 2015).

Overview of First Ascent

This study will focus on how the learning outcomes of First Ascent compare to those of ASU's academic orientation program. First Ascent was founded in 2002 by staff to, "address the anxiety often experienced by adolescents transitioning from high school to college," (Frauman & Waryold, 2009). The program consists of 4-6 weeks of wilderness sessions where student trip leaders take first-year students on a 4-day backpacking trip within a local wilderness area (First Ascent, 2015). There are also 1-2 base camp sessions where first-year students spend the week participating in different adventure-based activities. These activities include a day of challenge course facilitation, 2 days of climbing/rafting, and a day of community service. Each night, the group returns to a lodge within 10 minutes of the main ASU campus to reflect on the day, eat and sleep (First Ascent, 2015). The different sessions are led by the same core group of staff trip leaders who spend a week and a half in training prior to start of these sessions. The goals of First ascent is to assist students in finding their place in the Appalachian family through outdoor experiences with fellow students (First Ascent, 2015).

Measuring Interpersonal Development

When looking at the CAS standards, the dimensions of interpersonal competence includes meaningful relationships, interdependence, collaboration, and effective leadership

(CAS, 2009, p. 324). These dimensions, although difficult to measure, can be isolated by asking specific questions related to the framework of interpersonal capacities outlined by the National Research Council (NRC) in 2011. The NRC outlines interpersonal skills as active listening, oral communication, written communication, assertive communication, nonverbal communication, cooperation, trust, intercultural sensitivity, service orientation, self-presentation, social influence and conflict resolution (2011). These skills can be summarized into communication skills and relationship building skills. The NRC also developed a framework that defined interpersonal competence as working creatively with others, communicating clearly, collaborating with others, adapting to change, being flexible, interacting effectively with others, working effectively in diverse teams, guiding/leading others, and being responsible to others (2011). These key concepts will be integrated into the questions in the instrument used to assess interpersonal development through the transition experience.

Overall, there is a vast amount of literature connecting student success due to orientation programs aiding students throughout the transition experience. Orientation programs are critical to helping students when they enter college. Outdoor orientation programs further integrate students into the campus community through adventure-based experiences. The research behind outdoor orientation programs points towards them having powerful positive results.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to determine student transition success and orientation satisfaction. To determine orientation satisfaction and outcomes of each orientation program, a survey was distributed to the participants of First Ascent (see Appendices). Researchers distributed this survey instrument to Appalachian State University students who participated in First Ascent during the summers of 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. Total

participation in First Ascent in previous years are as follows; 2012 (N =82), 2013 (N = 77), 2014 (N = 94), and 2015 (N=75) for a total population size of 328 students. A link to the survey was emailed out to participants. A follow up email was sent approximately one week later. The survey was sent out using Survey Monkey and responses were recorded into an excel spreadsheet. Responses were kept confidential and only a summary of the aggregate data was used. To protect participants and to prevent tampering, all responses were kept anonymous and no IP addresses were collected by utilizing Survey Monkey advanced options. Participation was voluntary and all data was self-reported. The instrument was a locally designed survey and contained a Likert scale, quantitative questions and open ended qualitative based questions highlighting the 2015 CAS learning outcomes and best practices for orientation programs. The instrument was validated through faculty members, who are knowledgeable about the intended goals of orientation programs; review the instrument to establish content validity. In addition, the instrument was piloted with a small student population who would not be participating in the study.

Along with the survey, researchers conducted focus group discussions directing questions towards student success and the differences between outdoor and academic transition experiences. (see appendices). Focus group questions and protocol were validated using faculty members, knowledgeable about the intended goals of orientation programs. Focus group participation was self-selecting, consisting of students who participated in First Ascent and the academic orientation program. Although incentives from local gear shops were used and food was provided, only 2 students chose to participate in the focus group session. GPA and retention data as collected through Institutional Research (IRAP) and group means were compared. The GPA and retention data was de-identified and only aggregate data was used.

Analysis

To make sense of the Likert scale data collected in the survey, means were calculated for each question. These means were then compared from First Ascent against the means for the traditional orientation program. Researchers then conducted a two-tailed t-test ($P < .05$) to determine if there is a significant difference in responses. A content analysis of the open-ended survey questions was conducted to identify themes relevant to the outcomes of orientation programs. Focus group questions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed for specific themes relevant to the outcomes of orientation programs. These themes will lead researchers to make conclusions about the impacts that First Ascent has on incoming students at Appalachian State University and will help inform final recommendations for outdoor orientation programs.

Results

The survey was sent to 328 participants and researchers received 77 responses making the rate of return 23%. The graphs below summarize the demographics of the survey participants. They provide insight into the sample population who completed the survey and detail the type of First Ascent experience each participated in.

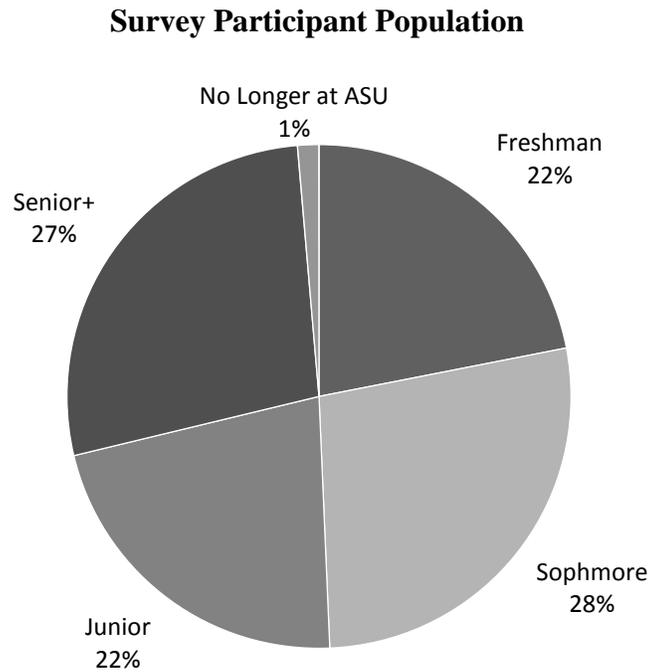
Quantitative Results

Figure 1. Survey Participant Population. This pie chart illustrates the sample population of First Ascent survey participants and their class level.

Survey Participant Program Experience

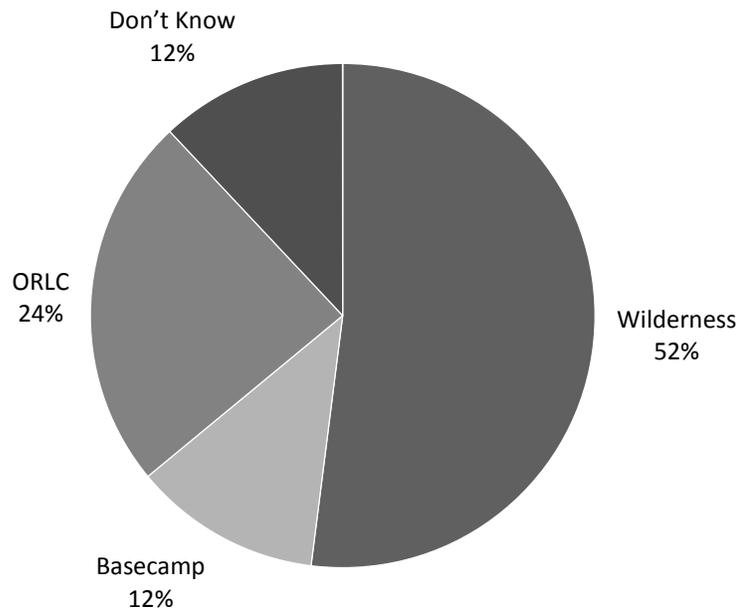


Figure 2. Survey Participant Program Experience. This pie chart illustrates the type of First Ascent experience survey participants participated in.

The results outlined in *Figure 1* shows researchers that there is a diverse spread of students from different freshman cohorts represented. This is essential to ensure that the data represents First Ascent over a few years rather than just over a single year. *Figure 2* shows that over half of the survey responses were from participants on the Wilderness experience and about one quarter of the responses were from the ORLC session. This is significant because the ORLC session is required for the students that choose to join the Outdoor Learning Community at ASU. Both the ORLC and Wilderness experiences are extended back-country programs and, based on the demographics, a majority of the data acquired in this study reflects the Wilderness-based experience.

The next group of 9 questions on the instrument are Likert scale questions asking students to compare their First Ascent Experience with their academic orientation program experience. Students selected a value from 1-5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Mean values were calculated for each question and are detailed in *Table 1*. The results of a two-tailed t-test comparing the First Ascent responses and the academic orientation program responses are also outlined in this table. For the t-test, a P-values of less than .05 indicates a significant difference between the responses and is noted using an asterisks.

Table 1
Quantitative Survey Response Summary

Question	First Ascent	Academic Orientation Program	P(T<=t) two-tail
1) This orientation program prepared me for the challenges I face in college.	3.79	3.13	4.39632E-05***
2) This orientation program helped me understand what I am capable of.	4.30	2.65	9.85022E-20***
3) This orientation program helped me transition into ASU.	4.29	3.35	5.33E-08***
4) This orientation program helped me meet other students who will be attending ASU.	4.50	3.32	5.46E-11***
5) I gained practical skills and competencies from this orientation program.	4.35	2.66	2.48E-22***
6) This orientation program challenged me intellectually.	3.81	2.41	5.36E-15***
7) My orientation leaders inspired me and got me excited about coming to ASU.	4.52	3.27	3.25E-12***
8) This orientation program encouraged me to engage in other community events and organizations.	4.12	3.13	9.82E-08***
9) I enjoyed my experience with this orientation program.	4.60	3.09	6.6E-19***

*p≤ .05; **p≤ .01; ***p≤ .001

An analysis of the t-test in *Table 1* shows that there is a significant difference in all 9 quantitative responses on the instrument. These questions directly relate to the CAS standards for orientation programs and lead researchers to believe that students were more satisfied with their First Ascent experience when compared with their academic orientation program experience. Research supports that the three greatest differences between First Ascent and the

academic orientation program are that First Ascent developed student self-efficacy, practical skills/competencies, and provided a more intellectually challenging experience.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data was gathered through four short answer questions on the instrument and through a focus group that was conducted after the survey was closed. The four qualitative survey questions were analyzed based on content and reoccurring themes were derived and recorded. “Themes” are defined as reoccurring content or ideas that express similar concepts or feelings. The tables below outline these themes and note the frequencies in which they occur in responses. Frequencies were calculated by dividing the number of responses with a specific theme by the total number of responses for each question. Total response numbers are noted in the caption using the symbol *n*.

Table 2: Why did you choose to participate in First Ascent? (Question 10)

Themes	Frequency (%)
Meeting new people.	34.3%
Love of the outdoors.	25.3%
Learning community requirement.	20.8%
To get a new experience.	17.9%
Parents signed them up.	7.4%
To have fun.	5.9%
Personal challenge.	5.9%
Program was recommended.	2.9%
To gain new skills.	2.9%
To visit Boone before college.	1.4%

Table 2. This table summarizes the themes found in question 10 responses. Significant themes are noted along with the frequency of each theme ($n=67$).

Table 3: What did you learn during ASU's academic program? (Question 11)

Themes	Frequency (%)
Academic advising	41.3%
Learning about campus life	32.7%
Learning about campus policy	6.8%
Meet new people	3.4
Getting involved on campus	1.7%

Table 3. This table summarizes the themes found in question 11 responses. Significant themes are noted along with the frequency of each theme ($n=58$)

Table 4: What did you learn during First Ascent? (Question 12)

Themes	Frequency (%)
Technical hard skills	62.9%
Interpersonal skills	40.3%
Intrapersonal skills	25.8%
Learned about ASU	12.9%
Learned about other people	6.4%

Table 4. This table summarizes the themes found in question 12 responses. Significant themes are noted along with the frequency of each theme ($n=62$).

Question 13 was a qualitative comparison of individual experiences between First Ascent and ASU's academic orientation. Pertinent quotes can be found in the discussion section. Numerical data was not collected.

A summary of the aggregate GPA and retention data retrieved from IRAP was also collected and summarized below. The data below uses 3 populations. The first population is those students who participated in First Ascent. The second population named, "Comparison Cohort," is a random sample of 100 students who only participated in the academic orientation. Finally, the last population, named "Entire Class," is the entire population of students in each graduating class. By comparing these three populations, researchers gain an insight into how the GPA and Retention rates compare between students.

The data in *Table 5* shows that there is a 12% higher retention rate for participants when compared to a comparison cohort for the last 2 years. The data in *Table 6* shows that there is a significant difference in GPA between First Ascent and a comparison cohort and between First Ascent and the entire class. It is important to note that this difference decreases as time after the orientation experience increases.

Table 5: Retention Data

Cohort	First Ascent (% Retained)	Comparison Cohort (% Retained)	Entire Class (% Retained)
2012	98.5%	86%	87.2%
2013	98.4%	86%	87.7%
2014	91.6%	86%	85.8%

Table 5. Retention Data. This table is a summary of the retention data provided by IRAP.

Table 6: Average GPA Data

Cohort	First Ascent Average GPA	Comparison Cohort Average GPA	Entire Class Average GPA
2012	3.46	3.01	3.04
2013	3.32	3.21	3.11
2014	3.18	3.12	3.08

Table 6. Average GPA Data. This table is a summary of the GPA data provided by IRAP.

Discussion

The data collected from the First Ascent Survey Instrument, from IRAP and through focus group discussion helped researchers better understand what factors influence students to participate in First Ascent and how First Ascent compares to the required academic orientation program. Researchers predicted that First Ascent has a significant impact on student success

throughout their experience at Appalachian State University. The factors leading to student success were academic achievement, personal (both interpersonal and intrapersonal) development, student engagement and student self-efficacy. This research addressed the limitations brought up by Bell and Holmes (2011) who isolated a need for comparative studies that compare outdoor orientation programs with non-outdoor based orientation programs. **First Ascent Participants**

An outline of the demographics in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* show that around 50% of the responses are from the First Ascent Wilderness Program and that there is an even spread of Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior responses. It also shows that there is representation from ORLC participants and from Basecamp Participants. This information leads researchers to conclude that there is a diverse spread participants in the survey and the results represent different experience types and that there are responses from different graduating classes.

The results in *Table 2* indicates that a majority of students participate in First Ascent because they want to meet new people, have a love of the outdoors, are required to by their living-learning community and to participate in a new experience. Researchers were surprised that only 7.9% of students indicated that they signed up for First Ascent because their parents wanted them to participate in it. This was contrary to predictions made at the beginning of the study.

GPA and Retention

Table 3 indicates that the two major outcomes that student's receive from ASU's academic orientation program is a chance to meet with an academic advisor and to learn about campus life. Meeting with an academic advisor is not a part of the goals of First Ascent yet campus life is often brought up in fireside conversations. Students indicated that they learn

technical hard skills, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills on their First Ascent experience. This was identified as a necessary outcome leading to student success (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989). These themes were not brought up in any reflection on the academic orientation program leading researchers to believe that First Ascent is a necessary experience to address the outcomes indicated in the CAS standards.

The IRAP data summarized in *Table 5* and *Table 6* shows that First Ascent participants have a higher GPA and retention rate when compared with both a comparison cohort and with the entire equivalent class. These results match the results found by Brown who found higher retention and adjustment rates (1998). One interesting piece of this data is that there is a greater difference in GPA between populations directly after a student's orientation experience. As a student advances in class, the difference in GPA becomes less significant. This may be the case with all orientation programs as noted by Robinson, Burns and Gaw (1996). This leads researchers to believe that the outdoor orientation experience has a significant impact during the first few years but may have less of an impact when the participant is a senior. Researchers believe that continued adventure-based experiences may be beneficial to students after their initial transition experience. It is difficult to link this significant difference with each student's experience in First Ascent yet researchers use qualitative data to help relate the correlation and determine that First Ascent leads to student success.

Perceived Outcomes

The qualitative data collected through the instrument and through focus group response support a strong connection between improving student success and First Ascent participation. Many themes and concepts were brought up yet student responses aid in the development of this conclusion. Below are individual statements from First Ascent participants that relate to the

themes expressed in Question 13. The first reoccurring theme in the qualitative responses defined First Ascent as a life-changing experience.

“My experience with First Ascent is an experience that will stay with me forever. I learned more about myself in those four days than in my entire life leading up to that experience. It also opened my mind and my heart to the whole world of self-discovery that I have been living in ever since” (First Ascent Participant 29)

There was also a reoccurring self-efficacy theme where students developed a new understand of what they were capable of both physically and mentally. This self-confidence was similar to the findings of Frauman & Waryold in 2009.

“I learned how to push myself both physically and mentally more than I ever thought I could. I actually thought I was dying climbing some of those hills. Once I was able to overcome those, my freshman year seemed like a breeze” (First Ascent Participant 62)

Along self-efficacy, a trust theme emerged and students noted the importance of leaning on their newly created friendships to help them conquer challenges they faced throughout the new experience.

“I learned the importance of loving myself, believing in myself, and accepting every single part of myself. It has been one of the most important lessons in my life and one I work on every day. I also learned the importance of loving and trusting in others. I couldn't have done it without the support of my friends and family and the support and strength the other members of my crew gave me. I learned to accept challenges that come my way and I now know that I have the ability to conquer them. My college career would have gone a lot differently if I didn't attend First Ascent” (First Ascent Participant 47)

This theme is also congruent with Tinto's research which highlights the importance of social relationships as a way to be more integrated into college (1988). Lastly, students mentioned how First Ascent helped them integrate into the community at Appalachian State University. This outcome is congruent with the findings of Bell et al. in 2014. This integration is essential to a successful transition into a college or university.

“I learned how to be a part of a community that relied on each person in order to succeed. I learned how to find a family in people I had never met before. I learned how to speak openly and how to listen. I learned how to be a leader and a follower. I learned to trust my body, to love its stench and its layer of filth, to listen to what it needed, to test it and push it. I learned how to identify my strengths and weaknesses in a constructive way, how to open up to the world, how to drop the weight of my burdens - I couldn't afford to be carrying them along with that pack. I learned to be my true and full self, to love that self, and in turn to be able to love the whole rest of the world that much better” (First Ascent Participant 5)

This social integration and sense of community theme is similar to the themes brought up by Barefoot and Gardner (1993) and match the results found by Astin et al. (2010). The theme of trust is also congruent with Bell and Holmes who found that the adventure setting fostered an increase of trust among participants.

Student Success

Ultimately, these responses give insight into the transformational experience that First Ascent offers incoming students. Some students noted that First Ascent and ASU's academic orientation program cannot be compared because they are completely different programs. This difficulty to compare programs was also addressed by Vlamis, Bell and Gass (2011) when they

concluded that it was not possible to generalize results due to differences in orientation program goals. Researchers believe that this study shows that both orientation experiences are critical to student success; academic orientation programs help students meet with advisors to determine academic plan while the outdoor orientation program helps students develop competencies, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, meet new people and develop a sense of community at their university. Researchers found that there was evidence that First Ascent had a significant impact on GPA and Retention yet there may be other factors leading to those outcomes. Student success is an important outcome of outdoor orientation programs and, through these findings researchers better understand how an outdoor orientation program guides students through transition experiences and lead to the development of undergraduate students.

Limitations

One limitation in the survey is that the responses were all self-reported. A participant with a negative experience might be less likely to have responded. Researchers were also only able to assess GPA and Retention over 3 years and only sent the survey to the past four years of participants. It would have been more powerful if the survey used a larger sample size over a greater period of time. Greater student participation in focus groups would have contributed more depth to our research. Compelling qualitative data was collected through the survey instrument and focus groups yet a pre/post survey may be a more accurate way to track development and gauge program outcomes. A lack of existing data for both First Ascent and ASU's academic orientation program illustrates a need for ongoing assessment. While research supports that students who participated in First Ascent had higher GPAs than students who did not, there may be other independent factors that could affect academic success such as participation in learning communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Continued collection of quantitative and qualitative data by orientation programs will help identify learning outcomes. Implementing pre and post surveys will help better track student development and be able to identify the factors that contribute to student success. Identifying learning outcomes and developing curriculum that follows CAS standards will help First Ascent meet student needs and remain current with industry trends. Additional research into the interpersonal relationship aspects of outdoor orientation programs would be valuable in isolating exactly which aspects of the experience have the most positive impact on student success. Research seems to indicate a relationship between continued participation in group outdoor activities that foster a sense of community and student success in specific areas such as GPA and retention. This recommendation is supported by data found in *Table 6*. Further research on the benefits of community living and the value of expedition based learning would increase knowledge base and help guide future program curriculum. Researchers came to view retention as a component of student resilience and believe that future research into student resilience would benefit the field of study and practice.

Conclusion

Researchers conclude that participation in an outdoor orientation program is critical in providing students with an experience that helps them successfully transition to college. The significance of this research lies in the reinforcement of the belief that outdoor orientation programs provide a valuable service to students and that continued involvement in community focused outdoor activities can have lasting benefits. The data collected by researchers also provides compelling evidence that participation in First Ascent influences student success in

college. This research also highlights areas of further study and a need for an increased and ongoing assessment procedure to properly evaluate program outcomes and success.

Appendix

First Ascent Instrument

Orientation Survey:

Please answer the following questions based on your experience with ASU's academic orientation program and your experience with First Ascent.

By using the following 1-5 scale, please select the value that most accurately represents the degree to which you agree with the statements listed below.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

General Orientation Satisfaction:

This orientation program prepared me for the challenges I face in college.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

This orientation program helped me understand what I am capable of.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

This orientation program helped me transition into ASU.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

This orientation program helped me meet other students who will be attending ASU.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

I gained practical skills and competencies from this orientation program.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

This orientation program challenged me intellectually.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

My orientation leaders inspired me and got me excited about coming to ASU.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

This orientation program encouraged me to engage in other community events and organizations.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

I enjoyed my experience with this orientation program.

1 2 3 4 5 ASU's Academic Orientation Program

1 2 3 4 5 First Ascent

Short Answer Questions:

Why did you choose to participate in First Ascent?

Please describe what you learned during ASU's Academic Orientation Program?

Please describe what you learned during First Ascent?

How did your experience with First Ascent compare with your experience with the academic orientation program at ASU?

Demographics:

I am currently a... First Year Second Year Third Year Fourth Year or higher
 Graduate Student I am no longer a student at ASU

I participated in First Ascent... Yes No

If yes, which program were you a part of? Wilderness Basecamp ORLC

Thank you for your participation in this survey!

Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. Describe and compare the First Ascent experience and the academic orientation experience.
2. What were the greatest outcomes of both of these programs?
3. What challenges did you face throughout these programs? Did these relate to the skills you need in college?
4. Did you feel one, both, or neither of the programs helped you succeed in college?
5. Did you feel that First Ascent helped improve your GPA and your decision to stay at ASU?

References

- ACT (2014). National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates. Retrieved from http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/retain_2014.pdf
- Astin A. W. (1999). *Student Involvement: A developmental theory for higher education*. Journal of College Student Development, 40(5), 518-529
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited* (Vol. 1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Austin, M. L., Martin, B., Yoshino, A., Schanning, K., Ogle D. H., & Mittelstaedt, R. (2010). The Intersection of Community and Place in an Outdoor Orientation Program. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 2(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1033>
- Barefoot, B. O., & Gardner, J. N. (1993). The freshman orientation seminar: Extending the benefits of traditional orientation. *Designing successful transitions: A guide for orienting students to college*, 141-153.
- Bell B. J., & Holmes M. R. (2011). Important factors leading to outdoor orientation program outcomes: A qualitative exploration of survey results. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 3(1), 4.
- Bell, B. J., & Starbuck, D. (2013). Outdoor orientation program trends at colleges and universities in the United States. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 5(2), 111–114. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1206>
- Bell, B. J., Holmes, M. R., & Williams, B. G. (2010). A census of outdoor orientation programs at four-year colleges in the United States. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 33(1), 1-18.

Bell, B. J., Gass, M. A., Nafziger, C. A., & Starbuck J. D. (2014). The state of knowledge of outdoor orientation programs, current practices, research, and theory. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 31-45.

Bell, B. J., Gass, M., & Vlamis E. (2011). Effects of college adventure orientation programs on student development behavior. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 34(2), 127-148.

Boyer, E. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.

Brown, D. A., (1998). Does an outdoor orientation program really work? *College and University*. 73(4), 17-23.

Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2009). The role of orientation programs. *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed.). Washington, DC: Author

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: the tailored design method*. John Wiley & Sons.

First Ascent. Appalachian State University, 22 March 2015. Retrieved from <http://op.appstate.edu/first-ascent>

Frauman, E., & Waryold, D. (2009). Impact of a wilderness orientation program on college student's life effectiveness. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 1(2), 191-209

Gardner, J. N. (1992). Keynote speech at 1992 Conference on Student Success Courses. Chicago: IL. *College Survival, Inc.*, Rapid City, SD.

James, J., & Waryold, D. (2010). In their own words: The perceived benefits of participation in the First Ascent wilderness orientation program. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 17(2), 40-51

- McCroskey, J. C., Booth-Butterfield, S., & Payne, S. K. (1989). The impact of communication apprehension on college student retention and success. *Communication Quarterly*, 37(2), 100-107.
- National Research Council (US) Committee on the Assessment of 21st Century Skills. (2011). *Assessing 21st Century Skills: Summary of a Workshop*. Washington (DC): *National Academies Press* (US); Chapter 3: Assessing Interpersonal Skills. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK84226/>
- Orientation*. Appalachian State University, 23 April 2015. Retrieved from <http://orientation.appstate.edu/>
- Quaye, S. J., & Harper, S. R. (Eds.). (2014). Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations. *Routledge*
- Robinson, D. A., Burns, C. F., & Gaw, K. F. (1996). Orientation programs: A foundation for student learning and success. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1996(75), 55-68.
- Smith, B. F., & Brackin, R. (1993). Components of a comprehensive orientation program. *Designing successful transitions: A guide for orienting students to college*, 35-48.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59, 438-445.
- Tinto, V., and Pusser, B. (2006) "Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success." Paper presented at the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success, Washington, D.C.

Vlamis, E., Bell, B. J., & Gass, M. (2011). Effects of a college adventure orientation program on student development behaviors. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34(2), 127-148.

Wolfe, B. D., & Kay, G. (2011). Perceived impact of an outdoor orientation program for first-year university students. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 34(1), 19-34.