

# College Outing Clubs and Risk Management

By

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Outing clubs provide an interesting risk management dilemma for college and university administrations. Four factors interact to inform this dilemma, and will be addressed in this paper: The value outing clubs place on their autonomy as peer run organizations, steadily increasing levels of sophistication in outdoor risk management, changing public expectations driven by the aggressive marketing of outdoor adventure programming, and the developmental characteristics of late adolescents. Each of these factors will be briefly elaborated upon, and then four common manners in which outing clubs are integrated in to campus communities will be presented and examined.

## *Outing club autonomy*

Most college outing clubs were founded by student outdoor enthusiasts. College administrators or faculty members have very rarely been the driving force in club formation. One result of this student-driven development pattern is that club members frequently feel a high degree of personal ownership for their organizations. This ownership is often a crucial and deeply held part of club culture, passed down from generation to generation of club leadership. For example, the New Hampshire Outing Club, based at the University of New Hampshire, takes great pride in being called the New Hampshire Outing Club and not the *University of New Hampshire Outing Club*. Students with high degrees of autonomy successfully managing outing clubs often have fantastic learning experiences and develop well-justified pride in their accomplishments. The freedom of college students to test boundaries and solve problems with a group of peers has considerable merit within an educational institution. Simply put, participation in outing clubs may provide students with significant developmental and educational experiences that should not be dismissed lightly.

## *Increasingly sophisticated risk management*

Standards in outdoor risk management have become increasingly sophisticated over the last twenty years. This sophistication, combined with the high level of autonomy characteristic of many outing clubs, poses a risk management challenge. Frequently, college outing clubs simply do not adopt current best practices in risk management. The highly demanding nature of current professional outdoor programming standards (i.e., mandating certifications such as WFR, WEMT, AMGA cert, commercial drivers licenses) may in fact render any expectation that student-run clubs adhere to them unrealistic. Such industry-standard certifications and skills training can require more than a hundred and fifty hours of time, a commitment many students are unable to make. It is therefore questionable if many student leaders have the necessary skills to run outdoor clubs according to modern risk management practices.

## *Program marketing*

Adding to these issues is what Reb Gregg has described as the unforeseen consequences of the successful mass marketing of outdoor adventure programming (personal communication, Jan. 1997). Effective marketing efforts have dramatically transformed public perceptions and expectations of such programs. Gone are the days when outdoor adventure trips were perceived of (and accepted as) potentially dangerous fringe undertakings. Now, not only is everyone expected to survive their adventure program, but also to develop cognitively, socially and emotionally as a result of their participation! Programs fuel these expectations with stories of tremendously successful alumni, superb safety records, impeccable training of staff, and well developed logistical resources to address problems in the field. The impact of such marketing efforts, undertaken primarily by large programs such as NOLS and Outward Bound, on public perceptions of college outing clubs is largely unknown. It seems plausible however, that as the general public comes to expect more from professional outdoor programs, outing clubs will not be differentiated. This provides a relatively new risk management problem in regards to college outing clubs.

## *Student development*

Newer research on college students and late adolescence provides information that may challenge previous assumptions of college students' readiness to run complex organizations such as outing clubs. One study found that 40% of students feel overwhelmed at college by the end of their first year (Keup & Stolzenberg, 2004). This can impact a students' readiness for increased training, participation on trips, and attending to mundane but time consuming tasks such as organizational paperwork. Students may simply not have enough time to effectively run outing clubs. Adding to this problem of competing priorities and demands, recent research identifies late adolescents (16-20) as having underdeveloped judgment skills due to their present stage of brain/ mind development (Giedd, 1999; Gorman, 2006). This is also a population

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noted for being chronically sleep-deprived and increasingly anxious (Twenge, 2001). In short, students running an outdoor operation on a college campus may face greater challenges than administrators and risk managers have previously assumed.

Given these tensions and changes, it is important for college administrators and outing clubs to engage in conversations about how outing clubs fit into the overall services provided to students, and how the risks associated with club activities will be managed. Obviously no one solution is appropriate given the differences in how colleges perceive their missions, value student autonomy, or want to connect with co-curricular programming. This article highlights four organizational structures for outing clubs, and outlines some pros and cons for each. The four structures presented are broad, and not mutually exclusive. Wide variability exists among schools' actual practices, and the authors note that we could define a hundred categories to increase accuracy, but doing so would probably decrease the usefulness of the model. Some clubs and programs may fit neatly in to one of these four structures. The structures may also be thought of as forming a continuum along which student autonomy and institutional oversight and control vary inversely. Rather than fitting in to a particular structure, many clubs and programs no doubt lie somewhere along this continuum, or even incorporate elements from several of the structures.

### The four main organizational structures of college outing clubs

#### The Common Adventure Model.

The term "Common Adventure" is derived from the legal world and is defined as: "...two or more individuals working cooperatively for common goals, and sharing expenses, decision making, and responsibilities as equitably as possible" (Watters, 1999). In practice, common adventures are composed of a group of individuals meeting to do something of common interest, with shared responsibility for risk management and safety among the goals of the trip. While a trip initiator may provide initial inspiration for a common adventure trip, all group members quickly become actively involved in the planning and decision making process. Individuals group members may assume primary responsibility for organizing specific aspects of the trip, but no one is placed in a position of "special knowledge" where her/his judgment is considered superior to that of other group members. Rather, a democratic or consensus decision-making process is used. De facto group leadership sometimes shifts as situations dictate, but this is an informal arrangement. These characteristics theoretically place common adventure trips under a legal rubric known as a "Joint enterprise". According to a Minnesota Supreme Court decision, in a joint enterprise, "all the parties have a community of interest in the purposes and objects of the undertaking and an equal right in its control and management" (Soule, 1981). Such a situation may greatly lower liability for all, since each group member is equally responsible for all group decisions.

**Benefits:** This is a simple model requiring the minimal intervention by the college administration and emphasizes personal responsibility.

*The benefits to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) Simplicity of the model
- (b) Few limits placed on students by college
- (c) The club, in theory, does not have a duty to provide information about trips, have participants sign waivers, etc. since participants are using the club to meet other individuals and create a joint enterprise.
- (d) A great reduction in the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy.

*The benefits to the College Administration:*

- (a) The college is also, in theory, free from liability concerns. Since the club does not sponsor or lead trips, but rather acts as an organizing point for individuals to gather, the college has no duty to provide special information to the club participants. A legal argument could be made that college bears no more responsibility for common adventure trips than it does for a group of students who gather in a residence hall and decide to take a road trip.
- (b) The college does not have to provide support to the organization.
- (c) The format encourages students to take personal responsibility.

#### **Challenges:**

*The Challenges to Outing Club Officers/Students:*

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- (a) Formal instruction to club members is outside the realm of a common adventure trip. More experienced members may share their skills and knowledge with those with less experience, but the "doing" of the activity is what is paramount. Skill development is informal, largely self-initiated and self-directed.
  - (b) Clearly distinguishing between a common adventure trip and a more formal activity is both difficult and important (if a club has some common adventure trips and some formal instruction trips). Club officers who are unfamiliar with common adventure may be lax in clearly communicating this distinction to trip participants.
  - (c) The pure common adventure model is based on the questionable assumption that club members will somehow develop personal skills outside the club. Formal instruction must be scrupulously avoided, because if offered, group members are no longer truly equal, and therefore no longer members of a joint enterprise. This presumably negates the theoretical legal advantages provided by common adventure trips and makes them a poor choice for novices (particularly the unconscious-incompetents who do not know what they do not know).
  - (d) Many students have been exposed only to the traditional leader-follower model of outdoor programming and thus lack the knowledge to work within a horizontal group structure. They may not know how to apply democratic and consensus-based decision making in outdoor adventure contexts. Accustomed to the standard leader-follower dynamic, it may be difficult for them to fully understand the complete sharing of responsibility and grasp its many implications for safety, risk management, and liability.

*The challenges to College Administrators:*

- (a) The college may be asked to defend its common adventure model to other stakeholders outside the institution (i.e., parents, lawyers, press, alumni), who may disagree with the joint enterprise approach. The theory of limited or no liability will likely be tested if the university has any connection what so ever to the club's activities (funding, providing meeting space, etc.).
- (b) Institutions offering other, more structured outdoor programming (i.e., academic wilderness courses or outdoor orientation), may in fact increase their legal liability if they allow common adventure outing clubs to operate in parallel to these professionally run programs.
- (c) This model removes formal educational and skills building programs from the club, and thus needs to exist in a culture of existing backcountry knowledge, where the combined awareness and skills in the group can provide for reasonable decision-making in backcountry conditions. When tried at schools without such a culture, problems can, and have, arisen.
- (d) There is at least one club with few experienced members that provided maps, gear, clothing, tents, etc. but no formal training or instruction, basically sending well-equipped groups of novices into the backcountry. The result was numerous close calls and incidents over a ten-year period.

### **The Independent Outing Club.**

Under this model, the college typically recognizes the outing club as an independent campus organization, sometimes clarifying that it is not responsible for the management or the function of the club, and sometimes simply assuming such independence is understood. The college attempts to distance itself from the club in a similar manner, but lesser degree, than in the common adventure model. While the club may assign formal leaders to its trips, there is no official college oversight or regulation of club activities. The argument is that college students are adults who have the freedom to associate. How they exercise that freedom is both under the students' control and is ultimately the students' responsibility. Often this means that the college's insurance program does not cover the activities of the outing club.

**Benefits:**

*The benefits to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) This model allows for increased freedom among the outing club leadership and may provide a great educational experience for students in the outing club.
- (b) This model respects the history of traditional college outing clubs.

*The benefits to the College Administration:*

- (a) Like the common adventure model, it does not require a large investment of resources to operate the club program.

- (b) If the club is successful, then students benefit positively from an experience in which they have a great deal of responsibility. It may add to the total learning of the students.

### **Challenges:**

*The challenges to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) The success of the club, and the relative quality and safety of its trips is completely dependent on the quality of the student leadership. Given the often-stressful nature of outing club leadership, burn out among good leaders is a significant concern. Since leadership changes frequently changes, club quality, policies and procedures may be highly inconsistent.
- (b) Access to insurance is either limited or non-existent. Although the college may encourage the club to purchase insurance, recent attempts to find an insurance company willing to provide a comprehensive policy to a primarily student-run outing club have been met with severe reservations by insurers. It is unknown what the cost and availability is for such an insurance plan.
- (c) The ability to maintain standards and training are challenging given the time commitments of the students, and the level of professional awareness among students can vary widely.

*The challenges to the College Administration:*

- (a) The outing club may be lacking with respect to current risk management standards.
- (b) The college often has little knowledge of what types of trips students are participating on and may be surprised by a club event inconsistent with the college's mission.
- (c) Emergency response capabilities are limited since the college does not provide any support in the case of an incident. For instance, a student calls the campus security office because they are lost and in trouble in the mountains, but no one on campus is prepared to provide assistance.
- (d) The public often perceives the club as being part of the college, and so the outing club's actions reflect upon the institution's reputation regardless of college policy

### **The Student-Run Outing Club with Professional Vetting**

Under this model students still hold officer positions in club and organize events. However, trip plans are vetted by a trained administrator who assesses risk management plans and meets with students on a regular basis. The college may offer training, bring students to conferences, and assist students in learning how to manage risks as club officers.

### **Benefits:**

*The benefits to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) Since the college is no longer holding the club at arms length, it benefits the college to encourage and sponsor training, often resulting in more funding for club endeavors.
- (b) This model offers more protection for the club officers since the institution is participating in the approval of plans. This theoretically brings club officers and leaders under the insurance coverage of the institution.
- (c) Greater clarity regarding the standards and expectations of the college through increased interaction between club officers and college staff.

*The benefits to the College Administration:*

- (a) The college is able to provide a set of standards to the club consistent with the overall institution's mission and culture.
- (b) The college is aware of trip plans (such as where students are in case of an incident), and has integrated the activities of the club into its overall crisis response plan.
- (c) The college has the authority to veto or alter club activities it deems unacceptably risky.
- (d) Current best practices in outdoor risk management can be communicated to club officers through conference attendance, and interactions with on-staff outdoor professionals.

### **Challenges:**

*The challenges to Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) Reduced autonomy of the outing club.
- (b) Students may not be able to lead the trips they had in the past due to campus policies and restrictions



- (c) Increased club dependence upon the college bureaucracy, often perceived as cumbersome by club officers.
- (d) Planning for trips needs to be completed earlier, requiring more organization among student leaders.
- (e) Loss of the informality of the peer community (just gathering to go climbing).

*The challenges to College Administration:*

- (a) Increased cost to college to hire and provide administrative time for a key employee who will vet plans.
- (b) Oversight and vetting must be careful and substantive. Failure to properly and thoroughly vet club policies and procedures may actually increase institutional liability.
- (c) Increased support for the outing club in training, risk management, and operations.

### **Outing Club becomes an Outdoor Program**

In this model, the traditional outing club works closely with a professional outdoor educator hired by the institution or actually becomes part of a formalized college outdoor program. This college employee becomes responsible for setting the standards for outdoor program operations, organization of trips, leadership training, managing the budgets, facilities, etc. Generally students who might have become club officers are focused more on leadership development, and not necessary the administrative duties of a traditional club. These programs often offer leadership training, so while students do not directly experience management of a program, the tradeoff is typically better designed courses and curriculum for student leaders. From a participant perspective, the outdoor program characteristically will offer more technical and adventurous trips because a professional staff member is more likely to have the skills and experience necessary to efficiently organize and safely deliver such trips. From the college perspective, since a professional staff member works with the program, the college is better able to integrate the outdoor program curriculum into campus goals and values.

**Benefits:**

*The benefits to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) Freedom from many of the mundane tasks of managing an outing club, such as budgeting, advertising, submitting reports.
- (b) A greater focus placed upon the leadership development of students, with more leadership training opportunities, and often certification courses and standards based assessments (i.e., Wilderness First Aid, EMT).
- (c) More involved trips, providing the students with a greater array of choices.
- (d) Long term program consistency. Student leaderships shifts as students graduate, but is maintained with a professional director.
- (e) Commitment from the college to sponsor an outdoor program

*The benefits to the College Administration:*

- (a) More control over the standards for adventure trips.
- (b) Increased ability to connect outdoor trips with co-curricular goals for students.
- (c) Students typically will receive more training and education.
- (d) More involved trips may be designed that have a greater impact on students
- (e) The outdoor program can adapt to new standards or concerns rapidly
- (f) The college has a representative working with the students to communicate the administrative message to participants, but also has a person gathering feedback and insights into the college.

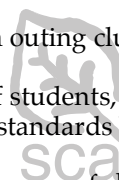
**Challenges:**

*The challenges to the Outing Club Officers/Students:*

- (a) Student leaders may lose autonomy and the experience of working out problems with a set of peers.
- (b) Students lose freedom to operate club in a more casual or relaxed manner.

*The Challenges to the College Administration:*

- (a) This model is the most expensive for, and requires the greatest commitment from, the college or university.
- (b) College needs to hire an individual(s) with a specific set of skills, and is dependant upon this trained employee to manage a program up to standards.



- (c) Increased direct college exposure to liability
- (d) A professionally run outdoor program may not meet all of the outdoor programming needs of a given student population. In such cases, this model may also require a common adventure-based or other less formal outing club operating in parallel to the professional program. Such a program would carry all the attendant challenges and benefits described above.

### Conclusion

Given the many design choices for college outdoor programs, it is important that the outing club and the college both thoughtfully consider all options. It is believed by these authors that making a deliberate program choice provides a better outcome for all interested parties than a club model forming along the path of least resistance. Although the college may have well designed policies and procedures for the operation of other student clubs and organizations, the outing club, with its immersion in a unique risk environment, may be different enough from these other organizations to warrant closer scrutiny by the college and the students leaders.

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