Developing competence: A qualitative inquiry of college student leadership in university outdoor orientation programs

J David Starbuck

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN UNIVERSITY OUTDOOR ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

BY

J. DAVID STARBUCK
Bachelor of Science, Bryan College, 2004
Master's of Divinity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2009

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

May 2013
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dissertation Co-Director, Brent J. Bell
Associate Professor of Kinesiology

Dissertation Co-Director, Ann Diller
Professor Emerita of Education

Michele M. Dillon
Professor of Sociology

Barbara E. Houston
Professor Emerita of Education

Bruce L. Mallory
Professor of Education

April 25, 2013
Date
DEDICATION

For Tara. I love you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My mother and father sacrificially invested in my education since the day of my birth. Leaving her career as a teacher within the public school system, my mother poured her time and energy into my learning every day through the end of high school. My foundation for learning was established immediately as a home schooled student, and I learned to take responsibility for my education at a young age. After high school, my father encouraged me to pursue the private school education I wanted even though it meant enduring a significant financial burden.

Mom and Dad, thank you for giving me the foundational knowledge and skills that have allowed me to be academically successful, and for instilling a love of learning within me. Thank you for empowering me to pursue my dreams. I love you both so much.

The education department at the University of New Hampshire is truly an incredible place. Mike Middleton, thank you for your encouragement as I was struggling to articulate research questions. I remember coming to you feeling frustrated and overwhelmed by the task ahead, and leaving your office confident in my ability to successful face the challenge. Eleanor Abrams, thank you for providing me with the information I needed to be successful in this program, and for having fun in the process!
Mike Gass and Jayson Seaman, thank you for caring deeply about your students, and for caring about me. I continually draw on foundational knowledge gained in your courses, and expect to continue to do so throughout my career.

The individuals who served on my dissertation committee have gone above and beyond the call of duty in supporting me throughout this program. Words cannot express the gratitude I feel toward each of you.

Ann Diller, the impact your impact on me as an educator, learner, and father cannot be overstated. When I met with you before applying to the Ph.D. program you suggested I take your class and get a feel for the program. I had no idea that your course would transform my understanding of teaching, learning, and educational philosophy. Thank you for mentoring me as I taught my own courses. Our weekly meetings throughout my first year teaching were invaluable as I brought questions, frustrations, and ideas to you. Thank you for patiently guiding me as I developed as an educator, and for regularly reminding me to slow down and spend time with my family.

Bruce Mallory, thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project despite an overwhelming slate of professional responsibilities. You have shaped my identity as a qualitative researcher, and heightened my understanding of the value of this work. Thank you for investing valuable time in our meetings. You truly guided me through this project.
Michele Dillon, I am so thankful you graciously accepted a role on my dissertation committee. Thank you for generously serving even though I am not in your department. Your input allowed me to expand the sample and increased the value of this study.

Andrew Bobilya, despite schedule conflicts that made it impossible for you to attend the defense, your input on this project has been incredibly valuable. Thank you for the advice you shared throughout the interview process. I have a great deal of respect for you as a researcher, and I value your friendship.

Barbara Houston, like many who have come before me, I thank you for changing my thinking. Your challenging courses transformed my ability to think critically. In my own courses, I find myself echoing your words often. I hope to maintain the same balance of rigorous expectations and unrelenting support you modeled for me. I will forever be more open to the possibility that I might be mistaken about a given perspective, and I will not stop striving for precision in my writing.

Brent, what can I say? I have utmost respect for your professional work. I feel very privileged to have studied with you, and I am proud to call you my friend. Thank you for pushing me toward excellence. Thank you for challenging me to relentlessly question findings in search of the truth in the data. Thank you for dozens of long, post-midnight phone conversations about this project. Thank you for immediate revisions of
multiple drafts that allowed me to maintain my unreasonable schedule and write "the fastest dissertation ever." I ordered a case of Diet Mountain Dew to be delivered to your office. You earned it. And you will need it—I'm looking forward to working with you on many future projects!

A special thank you is in order for the four program directors who invited me to research the student leaders. Thank you for your willingness to help me gather data during the busiest season of your year. Thank you for graciously hosting me as I traveled to conduct interviews, and for going out of your way to accommodate my needs during my visits. Without your help, this project would not have been possible.

Val Gin, thank you for your support and encouragement. Thank you for entrusting me with responsibility over a program I value.

This degree has required numerous sacrifices from my wife and children, and their toil deserves recognition. Jackson, you’ve brought so much joy to our life. I love you, buddy. And for my 3-year-old daughter Anna, who has for months asked: “Daddy, when are you going to be done with your dissertation?” I am finally finished! Let’s go play!

Tara, thank you for your consistent love and encouragement through two post-secondary degrees. After eight years of marriage, we can finally experience life without work and school responsibilities. You are the love of my life. I am so excited to venture into an unknown future with you and our two wonderful children.
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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING COMPETENCE: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN UNIVERSITY OUTDOOR ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

by

J. David Starbuck

University of New Hampshire, May, 2013

Forty-nine formal research studies have been conducted on participants of college outdoor orientation programs. Although many variables have been examined for the incoming students, only one study has focused on the impact on the student leaders.

The goal of this study was to understand how student leaders in outdoor orientation programs understand the impact of their leadership experience, and what aspects of the leadership role fostered value or personal significance. The study also investigated whether there were any notable differences between leadership experiences in faith-based versus non-faith-based programs. Data was collected from 36 first-time student leaders from 4 programs using a post-trip response essay & an in-depth interview with each student.

Findings indicate that students place high value on the leadership experiences, and perceived benefits of the leadership role are shared...
across the four programs examined in this study. Prominent thematic findings are presented as a 4-stage model of the trip leaders experiences.

Student respondents believe the outdoor leadership experience shaped their identity in three major ways. First, the most commonly described change is increased confidence; this refers to the belief in one's personal capability to be successful in the face of adversity; one's belief in the value of his or her perspective, leading to an ability to exercise his or her voice appropriately; and one's belief in his or her proficiency for leadership. Second, students recognize a change in interpersonal growth, described by a better ability to work well with others and facilitate social situations. The third change was reported only by students at the two Christian colleges. Within the faith-based programs, students reported experiencing spiritual growth.

According to the themes generated in this study, outdoor orientation program student leaders report accelerated growth in at least four of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships.

The outdoor leadership experience was highly valued by the student leaders and perceived as a significant growth experience. Outdoor orientation programs may have a beneficial impact on the growth of leaders as well as participants.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Can leading backpacking trips meaningfully influence the personal development of college students? How might the student leaders of these trips understand and make meaning of their experiences? This study seeks to understand how student leaders in outdoor orientation programs perceive the value and effects of their leadership role.

Personal Connection

I became interested in the power of outdoor orientation trips because I was deeply impacted by my leadership role in this environment. The first outdoor orientation trip I led produced noticeable growth in my own life. At that time, I was a graduate student and married. After spending my first year out of college working as a dirt-bike guide in Morocco and Africa and a second year managing a sales office in Pittsburgh, PA. I was more mature and more reflective than I had been as a college sophomore. Many of the students who were leading trips with me were younger and less experienced in leadership roles. Despite the fact that I had benefitted greatly from my life experiences up to that point, leading that first outdoor orientation trip taught me a great deal
about who I am and how I lead. Specifically, the trip caused me to shift from a traditional “hero” leadership mentality—where the role of leader is knowing and accomplishing all significant tasks—to a collaborative view of effective leadership, a distinction described by Eddy & Vanderlinden (2006). I learned the value of sharing power, responsibility, and ownership of a task. Though I had benefitted from experience in Morocco as a dirt-bike guide, leading expeditions where accidents could and did occur (traumatic brain injuries, broken legs, collarbones, etc.), and had also worked in a competitive corporate environment, managing a corporate sales team, leading an outdoor trip is what taught me how to be an effective leader. I changed: I developed a new understanding of others that helped me move away from leadership that depended upon charm. I began to listen and facilitate the needs of others. I helped incorporate the participants into the leadership of the group. The outdoor leadership experience showed me the amazing power of small groups. I began to truly value the input and perspectives of others and invite them into legitimate ownership of the group. Leading a trip helped me develop a more effective leadership style and helped me believe in my ability to positively impact the lives of those around me by empowering them to create and pursue common goals.

The outdoor leadership experience also taught me about how I perceive others. I learned I often stereotyped members of my group.
was now compelled to look beyond my preconceived ideas about people's background and life experiences. This became particularly apparent to me when we told "life stories" around the campfire after a challenging day of hiking. These personal narratives revealed a pattern of faulty expectations that people who talk or act like me have a personal history similar to my own. Hearing the stories of my new friends and realizing the diversity of experience within the group (even when participants were ethnically and socioeconomically homogenous) was both shocking and freeing. As I stepped back from preconceived expectations, I become more inquisitive toward individuals in the community.

Leading an outdoor orientation trip deepened my understanding of myself as a leader—one who was capable of managing the many responsibilities levied upon outdoor orientation program trip leaders. I realized I was capable of facilitating meaningful experiences in the lives of students. As I experienced this growth myself, I witnessed firsthand the growth of my fellow travelers. I found myself wishing that I had been privy to this opportunity during my own college experience.

Shortly after my outdoor orientation leadership experience I accepted a student development position at Gordon College. During the six years after my first outdoor orientation leadership experience I had the privilege of participating in the lives of many of these same students in
various campus contexts. There, I taught over 20 outdoor education courses, and some of my students later worked alongside me as teaching assistants. Others came to live in the residence hall where I served as a resident director. Three were RAs under my direct supervision. Some participated in the leadership development program I directed. After watching them develop during their years at Gordon College, I believe leadership experiences within the Gordon College outdoor orientation program made a meaningful contribution to students' personal development.

Many leadership opportunities on college campuses offer valuable learning experiences for students, and higher education literature provides extensive evidence that leadership is fostered to some degree throughout the college experience (Astin, 1993; Astin & Cress, 1998; Kuh & Hu, 2001). However, outdoor education experiences provide a unique context characterized by a small-group environment, leadership over one's peers, a supportive community governed by public-agreement group contracts (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), the wilderness environment, physical/emotional/social challenges, removal of technology and social media, and the creation of common goals. Other campus leadership opportunities, such as residence life, athletics, peer mentor programs, and work-study programs, may be capable of offering some of these
Definitions

Outdoor Orientation Program

This study defines an outdoor orientation program as a “college orientation program that works with small groups of first-year students, uses adventure experiences, and includes at least one overnight in a wilderness setting” (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010). This term simultaneously refers to both a type of general program and a specific student experience, a differentiation clarified by context.

Student Leader/Trip Leader

References to a student leader, trip leader, or leader refers to a student leader of an outdoor orientation program trip. To become a leader, a student must apply and be accepted into a training program through a competitive application process. A student prepares to lead in a backcountry context unless otherwise noted.

Participant

This term relates to the college student who participates in an outdoor orientation program trip as an incoming student. Most student leaders were participants as incoming students. In this study, they occasionally refer to their experience as an incoming student as their “participant trip.”

Trip

Unless otherwise specified, the generic term "trip" is used to indicate an outdoor orientation trip that takes place in the backcountry.

Program Director

The program director is the college or university staff member responsible for managing the outdoor orientation program.

College

Because three colleges and one university are included in the sample, all
institutions of higher education in this study are referred to as "colleges," and the student experience is referred to as "college" (i.e., throughout my four years at college)

**Backcountry**

Within this study, this term refers to a wilderness environment utilized for an outdoor orientation program trip. It is assumed that sleeping in a wilderness environment involves camping in a remote area more than one hour away from advanced medical care that is without access to electricity, plumbing, and other frontcountry conveniences.

**Significance and Implications**

Outdoor orientation programs operate within the most influential institutions of higher education in America today. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, outdoor orientation programs have been operating within the most prestigious institutions in the United States. All eight Ivy League institutions utilize outdoor orientation programming as well as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Penn State (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010).

Outdoor orientation on college campuses is growing. Data from the 2006 neighborhood project census indicated that there were 168 outdoor orientation programs within higher education institutions in the United States and that programs were growing at a rate of about 10 new programs per year (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010). This trend is verified by the 2012 census data. Through the survey process the research team identified 185 outdoor orientation programs, and 6 programs did not take the survey, indicating a current 191 programs currently operating in the
United States. These numbers indicate an increase of 10.9 new programs per year. (Bell, Nafziger, Gass, & Starbuck, in progress). During the same time period, 50 programs were discontinued, indicating a counteractive decrease of 6.25 programs per year. Both trends are similar to the finding in 2006: Approximately 10 new outdoor orientation programs began each year, but 6 were discontinued (Bell & Starbuck, in press).

Outdoor orientation programs have been primarily aimed at helping first-year students transition to college; however, student leaders may develop leadership skills within these programs. This is significant because leadership development is core to the mission of many higher education institutions. When not explicitly stated, leadership development is implied in the mission of nearly every institution of higher education in America. The following excerpts from three Ivy League institutional mission statements exemplify this ideal:

Education at Harvard should liberate students to explore, to create, to challenge, and to lead." (http://www.harvard.edu/faas/mission-statement)

Yale seeks to attract a diverse group of exceptionally talented men and women from across the nation and around the world and to educate them for leadership in scholarship, the professions, and society. (http://www.yale.edu/about/mission.html)

Dartmouth College educates the most promising students and prepares them for a lifetime of learning and of responsible leadership, through a faculty dedicated to teaching and the creation of knowledge. (http://www.dartmouth.edu/home/about/mission.html)
Examining the ways in which students experience leadership opportunities may offer insight for student leadership development. Phenomenological understanding may illuminate meaningful aspects of a leadership experience that students perceive as important or valuable.

Given the current growth trend, the influential nature of the institutions utilizing outdoor orientation programming, and the potential these experiences have for uncovering information about student leadership development, inquiry regarding the manner in which these programs impact leaders is a worthwhile endeavor.

Predicting the precise significance of these implications depends upon the analysis of the data that emerge from the process. However, even at this preliminary stage, hypothesizing about general significance and implications is feasible. If trip leaders are significantly impacted by their experiences, knowledge of this phenomenon will support outdoor orientation programs by recognizing that the program benefits are not just for the participants. Furthermore, this raises interesting questions about the possibilities for mentoring, reflection, and perhaps even spiritual growth for trip leaders. Outdoor education will benefit from a theoretically generative qualitative exploratory study in this area.

Simply offering students leadership over a group of their peers and sending them into the woods does not guarantee positive outcomes. These programs may do harm. Throughout this study, specific attention
will be directed at pursuing findings that suggest detrimental, disadvantageous, or negative effects of the student trip leader experience. Furthermore, since this is an area that has not been qualitatively researched, students may even be having transformative experiences, but perhaps of a wrong kind, or in a wrong way. Researching the student leader experience will help determine the value of these leadership experiences and their congruence to the goal structure of colleges and universities.

Students who lead outdoor orientation program trips are expected to lead their group through the backcountry while managing the risks inherent in such an endeavor and striving to achieve the goals of preparing participants for the upcoming transition into college. Student leaders accept a high level of responsibility for their participants. This project studies student perceptions of the value and effects of the outdoor orientation leadership experience, with the goal of understanding the lived experiences of students who experience an outdoor leadership role and possibly generating a theory about this phenomenon. It is hoped that the knowledge generated from this study will increase the value of these experiences while minimizing or eliminating negative consequences.

If students perceive their outdoor orientation leadership experience as valuable, then how, exactly, do they think they are being impacted? If
these students are truly being changed, what about them is changing and what causes the shift to occur? How do students perceive the value and effects of their training and experience within college outdoor orientation programs? These are the questions driving this study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter includes an overview of the conceptual context and theoretical orientation for the study and presents the pilot study that was formative in developing the methodology for this project. Although more than 4,000 undergraduates lead college outdoor orientation program trips every year, Bell states that "the benefits to the student leaders remain largely unknown" and the impact of outdoor orientation programs on student leaders needs to be researched (Bell, Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008).

Conceptual Context and Theoretical Orientation

Outdoor orientation programs provide an engaging introduction to college life. The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) defines "engagement" as a construct encompassing student effort toward academics and educationally beneficial activities (Kuh, 2009). Essentially, NSSE attempts to quantify and measure students' investment in their education. Engagement is about becoming a philosopher of one's own learning and actively "claiming" an education, rather than passively receiving knowledge from professors (Rich, 1979 in Diller, 1999). Leading outdoor orientation trips may demonstrate this type of engaged learning.
Baumeister and Leary (1995) challenge Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs and propose the idea that "the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation" (p. 497). Rather than understanding human behavior as sequential fulfillment of primary needs leading to the needs of love and belonging only appearing after food, hunger, and safety are satisfied, Baumeister and Leary suggest "belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food and that human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness" (p. 498). Outdoor orientation programs provide an environment conducive to belonging to one's group, incoming class, and institution. This theory may explain many positive outcomes students derive from outdoor orientation experiences, and may be helpful toward understanding the trip leader experience as well.

**Outdoor Orientation Program Research**

Forty-nine formal research studies have investigated an array of outcomes and benefits for participants of outdoor orientation program trips. Research shows that outdoor orientation programs are capable of fostering and increasing a variety of diverse and generally positive outcomes. Outdoor orientation experiences have been shown to improve academic success (Bell & Holmes, 2011; Sullivan et al., 1971; Lechner, 1976; Stogner, 1978; Gass, 1987), retention (Gilbert, 1984; Gass, 1987; Gass, 1990; Brown, 1996; Oravec, 2002), physical endurance
(Sullivan et al., 1971), extracurricular involvement (Sullivan et al., 1971; Gilbert, 1984), a successful adjustment to college (Brown, 1996; Gass, 1987; Oravecz, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2007), social support (Bell, 2005; Gass et al., 2003; Wolfe & Kay, 2007; Austin et al., 2009), community development (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009), sense of place (Austin et al., 2009), self-concept (Wetzel, 1978; Wolfe & Kay, 2007), self-satisfaction (Stogner, 1978), self-confidence (Oravecz, 2002), tolerance (Gass, 1987), spiritual development (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009), and mature career plans (Vlamis, 2002). These outcomes illustrate the benefits participants may receive from outdoor orientation program trips. Participants are not the focus of this study; however, most leaders experienced outdoor orientation as incoming students. Recognizing the possible effects of program participation may clarify students' experience of the leadership role.

**Research on Outdoor Orientation Student Leaders**

Since 2000, at least 20 studies have been conducted on outdoor orientation programs. Although many variables have been examined for the participants of these trips, only one study has focused on the impact on peer leaders. There has been little investigation into what elements of training and trip leading might influence outcomes. One recent dissertation investigated the specific outcome of leadership self-efficacy among trip leaders. Fields (2010) conducted a sequential explanatory
mixed-methods study (Creswell, 2009). Findings from the Fields (2010) study support the research questions of this project because if student leaders can experience increases in leadership self-efficacy, there may be other unknown benefits or drawbacks present within the leader experience. Whether similar findings may emerge in the current study is of interest. Fields' sample consisted of 15 students who completed the following quantitative pre- and post-test instruments: the Outdoor Recreation Self-Efficacy (ORSE) scale (Mittelstaedt & Jones, 2009) and the Leadership Self-Efficacy scale (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Students were also given opportunity to respond to the following open-ended question: "Please write any additional comments regarding your leadership, experiences, or application of learned ideas below or on back." Five students were selected to participate in an interview as well, with the primary goal of investigating reasons for leading a trip and ways in which the experience affected their leadership self-efficacy. Themes of fun, rewarding, challenging, and empowering emerged from the interviews. Leaders described "facilitating fun" and generally enjoying the process of being part of the group. The experience was seen as rewarding because the student leaders felt they were helping others, and it was the first time some of them had ever experienced a leadership role. They reported feeling challenged by feelings of responsibility for their participant's safety, relationships with co-leaders, and the general group dynamics of their
patrol. Though there was an occasional drop in their leadership self-efficacy during the experience, students believed they were more confident in their ability to lead at the culmination of the trip (Fields, 2010). Quantitative measures showed a statistically significant increase in leadership self-efficacy, according to the Outdoor Recreation Self-Efficacy (ORSE) scale (Mittelstaedt & Jones, 2009); however, the Leadership Self-Efficacy scale (Dugan & Komives, 2007) failed to reject the null hypothesis. Within the ORSE, measures of capable, competent, skilled, confident, adequate, success, achieve, accomplished, choose, succeed, and empower showed significance; themes that did not show significant increase in the mean were enjoyment, challenged, excited, good time, energized, involved, and fun (p. 114).

The Fields (2010) study concluded that students' training and leadership experience increase leadership self-efficacy. Qualitative interview data confirmed the findings from the ORSE scale. Given the findings from Fields (2010), leadership self-efficacy was of interest at the current study began. I questioned whether student leaders would discuss the leadership self-efficacy construct without being directly asked. As a researcher who was aware of this construct, I developed the interview questionnaire to specifically avoid leading questions in this domain (Seidman, 2006). No questions on the interview questionnaire directly inquired about leadership self-efficacy. Findings were drawn from broad,
open-ended questions that strengthen the validity of the data.

**Research on Peer Leadership in Higher Education**

Peer leadership within outdoor orientation programs has not been widely investigated; however, higher education literature addresses the impact upon students who experience peer leadership in other domains, and these studies may be helpful. Intercollegiate athletics, residence life, and college-sponsored peer mentor programs provide college students with many opportunities to assume peer leadership roles, and higher education literature contains data in these contexts. Analyzing the benefits and challenges that student leaders experience within these arenas may suggest the possibility of parallel outcomes shared by peer leaders of outdoor orientation programs.

Research in higher education suggests peer influence has tremendous potential impact upon the college student experience, and though some negative outcomes occasionally arise, “when peer interactions involve educational or intellectual activities or topics, the effects are almost always beneficial to students” (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999, p. 617). Astin (1993) argues that peer groups influence college students more than any other aspect of the university experience. “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, p. 398). Higher education literature recognizes that students are
significantly influenced by their peers; we know that first-year students can be especially influenced by a "successful" upper-class student peer (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Cuseo, 2010).

Positive peer influence may be especially important for first-year students because they are experiencing a major transition to a new social environment and peer culture. During this transition, new students are likely to have strong needs for "belongingness" and social acceptance, and may be looking for support and direction from others who have made the transition successfully. Connecting new students with more experienced peer mentors and role models can supply a source of positive peer power that fuels first-year students to higher levels of academic performance and higher rates of persistence to graduation. (Cuseo, 2010)

Similar to research in outdoor orientation programs, the "peer influence" branch of higher education literature typically places a focus on the students being led or mentored. Allen, Poteet, and Burroughs (1997) recognize this reality within the peer mentoring literature. Even so, some studies have examined the value of leadership experiences. The following studies illustrate what is currently known about the benefits of student peer leadership.

**Peer Leadership in Intercollegiate Athletics.** Grandzol, Perlis, and Draina (2010) conducted the first qualitative study of leadership outcomes of captains of college athletic teams. They examined athletes at six universities and found that "merely participating in athletics had little influence on leadership development...[but] serving as a team captain provided a rich opportunity for students to learn and practice leadership skills" (Grandzol et al., 2010, p. 403). In this study, team captains were
found to learn and use leadership skills that their fellow teammates do not necessarily employ. The experiential nature of this learning experience led to a perception of increased leadership ability among the athletic team captains. Grandzol et al. (2010) point out that team captains are often selected based on perceived leadership ability, but note that the data reflects a significant increase in leadership ability for captains but not team members. The natural follow-up question is, "Which came first, the leadership or the position?" (p. 414). Do students develop leadership skills because of the role they are given, or are students given the leadership role because they already possess recognizable leadership ability? Results from the Grandzol et al. study suggest that the leadership role provides a catalyst for leadership development; the researchers recommend that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) utilize mentoring programs to further increase leadership development among team captains. Elements leading to the leadership development of team captains may or may not be present in outdoor orientation leadership roles.

Peer Leadership in Residence Life. College resident advisors (RAs) also experience positive student development outcomes. An unpublished graduate thesis study at a large state university surveyed 148 RAs using the Student Leadership Outcomes measure. RA leadership has been shown to enrich a student's overall college experience, increase confidence to
interact with new people, and the development of diplomatic confrontation skills (Byrne, 1998). Outdoor orientation program leaders may experience similar benefits from their leadership role.

**Student Leadership in Peer Mentor Programs.** Within the past 10 years, the number of colleges and universities utilizing peer mentor programs has risen (Colvin, 2007; Jacobi, 1991; Topping, 1996). Reasons for this trend include tightened university budgets combined with higher student populations at many institutions (Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2010). Four research articles that address higher education mentor outcomes utilized methodologies that minimized threats to validity (Colvin, 2007; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Jacobi, 1991; Topping, 1996). The following is a summary of the findings from these studies.

Colvin (2007) analyzes understandings of peer mentor roles within college classrooms and concludes that a uniform understanding of mentor and protégé roles should not be assumed. Students, instructors, and mentors hold varying expectations for the relationship, and those differing expectations lead to an array of benefits and risks. Some of the most prominent role expectations include “connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend” (p. 121).

Colvin and Ashman (2010) stated, “Almost every proponent of peer approaches indicates some sort of benefit to both sides of a peer mentor
relationship” (p. 128) but cite no research to justify this claim. However, evidence supporting peer mentor benefits did emerge within the Colvin and Ashman (2010) study. Mentors indicated benefits of being able to support other students, being able to personally apply relevant concepts, and establishing campus connections that they may not have otherwise enjoyed. Many students believed that the process of helping others had also helped them personally (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Accepting the mentor role involved risk as well. In the classroom environment, the primary risk discussed by Colvin involves negative reactions to the perceived authority of the mentors within the structure of the institution. As mentors deal with issues of power from their mentee students, “risks, power, and resistance were acknowledged, but benefits were recognized much more frequently by all participants” (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 130). Evidence from this study suggests that the peer mentor role in higher education, though potentially challenging, is capable of benefitting not only those being mentored, but the student mentors as well.

Another benefit common among peer mentors is cognitive growth fostered by the process of simplification, clarification, and exemplification (Topping, 1996, p. 324). In her presentation of a typology for higher education peer mentor programs, Topping (1996) references a study by Annis (1983). Randomly selected student groups were asked to read a
selection of text. The first group was asked to read for comprehension only, the second group asked to read in order to prepare to teach to a peer, and the third group asked to read for teaching and carried out the teaching to a peer. “The 'read only' group gained less than the 'read to teach' group, which in turn gained less than the 'read and teach' group. The tutors gained more than the tutees” (p. 324). This finding is also supported by Benware and Deci (1984, in Topping, 1996), whose random sample of students who learned material with the intention of teaching it to others showed higher-level conceptual understanding than those who simply learned it for personal knowledge (Benware & Deci, 1984). As students teach academic content to their fellow students, learning is often enhanced for both parties.

Peer mentor program research indicates that potential benefits for mentors include social benefits (Colvin, 2007), developmental benefits (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), and academic benefits (Topping, 1996).

Connection to Outdoor Orientation Leadership Role. Higher education research indicates the value of leadership among one's peers within the college environment. It is not surprising that students derive benefits from leading athletic teams, residence hall communities, and other students in mentoring relationships. Recognizing that “most scholars who study the impact of college on students agree that what happens outside the classroom can contribute to valued outcomes of college,”
Kuh (1995) set out to “identify the out-of-class experiences that seniors associated with their learning” (p. 124). In an examination of the impact of out-of-class experiences on social and emotional growth, Kuh (1995) examined 149 students from 12 universities and concluded that “out-of-class experiences have the potential to contribute to valued outcomes of college” (p. 145).

Without disregarding the importance of curriculum, Kuh cites a host of benefits that students derive from even the most general involvement in extracurricular activities on campus, but especially through leadership roles. Kuh argues that gains in critical thinking, relational skills, and organizational skills acquired in this out-of-class realm “are highly correlated with satisfaction and success after college” (p. 150). When students experientially engage in leadership roles on campus and among their peers, they tend to develop leadership skills that transfer to other contexts.

From the higher education literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) recognize that “students’ social and extracurricular involvements have important implications for what is learned in college” (p. 120). Peer relationships are a critical aspect of the college student experience, and practice in leading one’s peers is valuable on many levels (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1999). Students able to engage in these activities may gain confidence in their interactions with
other people, develop diplomatic confrontation skills, and have a better overall college experience (Byrne, 1998). Additionally, these positions help students shift their focus from their own needs to the projects of others and accept responsibility for others.

Outdoor orientation trip leaders must take on multiple leadership roles, including "being a skill trainer, program designer, translator, group facilitator, and one-on-one counselor" (Kalisch, 1979, p. 142). This variety of role responsibilities may foster similar outcomes generated through leadership within residence life, athletics, or peer mentor programs. The context of outdoor orientation program trips differ from the contexts of previous peer leadership research in higher education, and this is likely to change the findings that emerge from the experience. Unique aspects to the outdoor orientation environment include a short but intense leadership experience (the trip only lasts 4 to 17 days; however, leaders are usually with their participants 24 hours a day during the experience), a backcountry context, and an experience that takes place immediately before the transition into college. These factors may be important variables impacting how leaders make meaning of their experience.

**Potential Theoretical Connections**

Student developmental needs have been described numerous ways. Popular psychosocial theories often applied to higher education include Erikson's (1959) eight developmental crises, Josselson's (1987)
pathways to identity development, and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of development. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) work is the most researched and influential of these theories, shaping the field of student development and finding application among many school administrations as well (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Chickering and Reisser's vectors provide an appropriate framework for understanding college student needs.

The theoretical lenses of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student development and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1996; Midgley, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001) may be helpful in understanding the lived experience of trip leaders and may illuminate the significance of those experiences in light of a student developmental perspective shared by higher education professionals. Chickering and Reisser's vectors provide a framework for understanding the developmental needs of college students, and stage-environment fit theory offers a foundation to understand how the outdoor orientation environment may positively or negatively interact with students' developmental needs. Outdoor orientation leadership opportunities may match the developmental needs of college students by demanding responsibility, offering relational and environmental consequences (both positive and negative) for actions, and offering students the opportunity to participate in meaningful acts of service.
toward others. In *Education and Identity* (2003), Chickering and Reisser suggests that those needs interact significantly with the environment, dedicating the 16th chapter to this topic.

**Stage-Environment Fit.** Stage-environment fit theory has been used to explain and predict positive outcomes within middle school contexts (Midgley, 2002). Findings from previous studies suggest that “some of the negative changes associated with adolescent development result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by their social environments” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). Despite increasing student needs for peer and student-teacher relationships in middle school, the context often provides “less perceived social support and more of an emphasis on grades and competition” (Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1997). Additionally, though middle school students crave increased autonomy and self-determination, the typical junior high school environment provides little flexibility and choice (Eccles et al., 1993). Middle school students are notoriously challenging to work with; however, the research conducted by Eccles and her colleagues suggests that the school environment may be a significant contributing factor.

Stage-environment fit has offered valuable information capable of improving middle school environments, but the idea has not been applied to higher education. The essence of the theory is clearly stated by
Midgley et al. (2002): "Stage-environment fit is based on the assumption that if changes in needs are aligned with changes in opportunities at a certain stage of life, positive outcomes will result" (p. 110). Analyzing the higher education environment from this perspective may offer insights to help students experience success in college. College students may encounter a misaligned fit with leadership opportunities during residential higher education experiences, as students are increasingly sheltered from responsibility or consequences of their decisions. Eccles (1993) points out the necessity to adapt as students develop through their adolescence. "Individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals as they mature...[so] schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students' interest and engagement as the students mature" (Eccles, 1993, p. 1). The college years are a critical time of continued development for many students. When applied to higher education, stage-environment fit may show that college students also excel when their environment matches their perceived needs.

Seven Vectors of Development. Chickering & Reisser's (1993) work proposes that students develop along seven vectors essential to developing the overarching college goal—autonomy. These vectors may
provide an appropriate framework for discussing the environment experienced by outdoor orientation program trip leaders.

The vectors are:

1. Achieving competence
2. Managing emotions
3. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence
4. Developing mature interpersonal relationships
5. Establishing identity
6. Developing purpose
7. Developing integrity

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993)

College students are ready to assume responsibility for others and benefit greatly from the experience of caring for their peers. Trip leadership may also immerse students into an atmosphere that fosters some of Chickering and Reisser's vectors. If students are attributing growth among these developmental vectors to their wilderness leadership experience, it may suggest that certain aspects of the trip leadership environment align with their developmental needs.

Pilot Study

Method

Higher education research indicates the significance of peer leadership roles, evidenced by outcomes of increased leadership ability
(Grandzol et al., 2010), competence, confidence, confrontation skills (Byrne, 1998), and academic growth (Topping, 1996). The absence of research on my target population led me to question what effects peer leadership within outdoor orientation may have on student development. This led to a pilot study investigation of how students perceive the value and effects of their outdoor orientation leadership role. The pilot provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how outdoor orientation trip leaders may benefit in similar ways to other populations studied in the higher education peer leadership literature as well as scaffolding for the methodology chosen for the final study.

Between the 2010 spring and fall semesters, I interviewed 24 trip leaders from two institutions in a small-scale phenomenological pilot study. Institution 1 is a small private college in New England. Student leaders from this institution’s program (N=10) had been staff members together in 2007. Each of these students led 12-day backpacking and/or canoeing trips with underclass peers.

After analyzing data from the first group of respondents, I chose to interview a second group (N=14) of leaders at a mid-sized university, referred to here as Institution 2. Leaders within the Institution 2 program led shorter trips lasting 5 days. Interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes each. Semistructured interviews consisted of open-ended questions, and I did not ask probing or follow-up questions. Only the following questions
were asked:

- Do you believe leading a trip changed you significantly?
- If so, what changed?
- Why did it change?
- How did it change?

Interview responses were coded according to notes taken during and immediately after the interview.

**Results**

Within the first group from Institution 1 (N=10), all students claimed that the leadership experience had changed them significantly. Specific codes that emerged include, according to frequency of response, reported gains in responsibility, confidence, leadership development, identity formation, relational growth, and environmental awareness. The chart below illustrates the frequency and consistency of each code. Check marks indicate students who discussed the corresponding theme in their interview.
Significant Change. Within the Institution 1 interviews, all students believed they had been significantly changed by their outdoor orientation trip leadership experience.

Responsibility. From these first ten interviews every respondent also identified the level of responsibility experienced on the expedition as an important factor contributing to his or her personal growth. Many reported feeling responsible for someone other than themselves for the first time.

I had to be responsible, not just for myself but for others. Going in, I was scared. But realizing that I could do what I didn’t think was possible gave me a ton of confidence. I proved to myself that I could do it.

This responsibility can be categorized into at least three domains. First, students felt responsibility for the safety of their participants as they traveled into wilderness contexts and assumed the role of the first
responder to any physical emergencies that could arise. Second, students felt responsible for the nature of the experience being offered to their participants. Many indicated a desire to lead based somewhat on their positive participant experience and felt a sense of responsibility toward providing an equally positive experience for their participants. The third dimension of responsibility experienced involves personal growth and meaning. Within the Institution 1 program, this idea was prevalent. However, within the Institution 2 program, this idea was not mentioned.

**Confidence.** Nine of the participants linked their gains in confidence with the level of responsibility they felt entrusted with and believed it to be a direct result of handling the responsibility entrusted to them. Because they were placed in a position where they had to perform, they realized that their potential was far greater than they had previously realized. This code is characterized by the quote: "When I am put into a situation where I am in charge, I'm more comfortable because of the confidence I developed." This domain may overlap with the leadership domain, as confidence is a factor that influences one's ability to lead in the face of opposition.

**Leadership Development.** Most students described this as the ability to make good decisions (even under pressure). They referenced a transition from traditional "hero" leadership toward collaborative and facilitative leadership, as mentioned earlier (Eddy & Vanderlinden, 2006).
"I became better leader. I learned to be assertive without being authoritarian. My listening skills improved, and I learned to be a more active listener." Another student said, "Leading a trip changed the way I plan, organize, delegate, and deal with conflict." Students believed that the multifaceted leadership roles of leading trips had prepared them to take on leadership in new contexts.

**Relational Growth.** Seven students mentioned a belief in the value of interpersonal interaction on the trip. As students care for members of their group, handle conflict within the community, and give and receive feedback throughout the experience, their ability to successfully navigate interpersonal situations beyond the trip increases as well. After mentioning the regular debriefing exercises that took place on the trip, one leader remarked, "I learned to ask good questions—to draw other people out... that has brought a whole new level to all of my relationships, both family and friends." This student went on to describe the transformative impact this new skill had upon other communities beyond the trip.

**Identity Formation.** Six students discussed the idea that trip leadership had helped them understand and establish their sense of self. One student remarked, "[Leading a trip] helped me figure out who I was." Another articulated the manner in which leading the expedition had improved her self-awareness: "[Leading a trip] helped me get a better grasp on myself—how do I function? What situations are hard for me, or
easy for me? Afterwards I became much more self-aware and able to
assess myself correctly."

**Environmental Awareness.** Only two students noted a higher level of
concern for the natural environment that changed their behavior beyond
the trip. However, their responses were nearly identical. Students
attributed the development of increased environmental awareness to
having to think through and teach their participants why Leave No Trace
(LNT) practices should be followed. "Being a [trip leader] . . . helped me
be more concerned with my personal impact on the environment." These
student leaders believed their trip leadership experience dramatically
altered the manner in which they view and interact with various
environments.

**Discussion**

I was concerned that the selection of leaders who had been on staff
together and interacted together may have skewed the data. Curious to
see whether the findings would remain consistent within a completely
different program context, I interviewed a second cohort of trip leaders
\( N=14 \) from a different university program. Although relational growth,
identity formation, and environmental awareness codes did not appear
within this group, the themes of responsibility leading to confidence that
fosters future leadership opportunities were strong. From the pilot study, it
became clear that students perceived positive effects from their
leadership role, and more research was needed to investigate and understand the perceived impact of trip leadership experiences upon students. The pilot study provided new information previously absent in the literature and led to the following questions: Would similar themes of responsibility, confidence, leadership development, identity formation, and environmental awareness emerge within the context of a more rigorous qualitative study? What additional themes might emerge? How do expectations and perceptions impact student outcomes? These questions fall within the scope of this study. This pilot provided findings that were helpful in guiding the methodology decisions outlined in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I set out to clearly articulate my research tradition and methods. I hope to describe the process by which I made decisions regarding these foundational elements of the project. I begin by presenting the research questions for the current study. These are followed by explanations of the qualitative phenomenological research tradition and elements of this traditional approach that indicate efficacy for this particular project. Next, methods are described in detail. Finally, I conclude with a section that outlines the four college and university programs included in the study, describing program elements, length, available activities, and goals.

Research Questions

The primary research questions of this study are: How do peer leaders of college outdoor orientation programs perceive the value and effects of their training and experience? If leaders perceive a change, to which aspects of the experience do trip leaders attribute these changes? Do trip leaders perceive something about leading wilderness trips that induces these changes? Finally, do differences arise between faith-based
programs and programs without a particular spiritual orientation? Because of differing program goals, both faith-based and non-faith-based programs will be selected in the sample. The questions ask about perceptions of value and perceptions of change because these were strong themes in the pilot study. It is not assumed that being a leader for a program is impactful. Disadvantages, deficiencies, or negative outcomes brought about by leading outdoor orientation program trips will be diligently pursued. Data from student leaders will be analyzed thoroughly to present an accurate depiction of "the essence of shared experience" for students leading outdoor orientation program trips (Patton, 2002, p. 71).

**Research Tradition**

King (1994) emphasizes the efficacy of qualitative methodological stances when exploring new concept dimensions. Because peer leaders of outdoor orientation program trips are relatively unstudied, in-depth interviews with these leaders provide the potential for generating a rich database of information that may inform subsequent quantitative studies (pp. 14–36). My research question naturally lends itself to a qualitative approach. Conducting interviews with trip leaders has the potential to produce valuable information regarding the impact of the experience on the leaders.

By Creswell's (2007) definition, this study will be phenomenological
in nature because its purpose is to "describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (p. 57). Throughout this study, I will aim to generate theory through the use of phenomenological tools—theory grounded in the participants' own understanding of themselves and their experience. I am interested in perceptions of change. How do students think leading a trip changed them? What meaning do they ascribe to the experience of leading a trip? This study does not set out to prove that changed occurred, but rather to investigate whether student leaders believe change occurred.

The phenomenological, qualitative approach can provide particularly valuable insights into understudied areas (Seidman, 2006). It is especially appropriate for this study, as the research questions revolve around the significance of a lived experience (Creswell, 2007). The primary goal of this approach is to provide a composite picture of the shared values or experiences from a given phenomena—as understood through the perspectives of a group of individuals. Van Manen (1997) describes this aim as grasping "the very nature of a thing" (p. 177). As I embark on this journey, I embrace the first of Stewart and Mickunas' (1990) four philosophical perspectives in phenomenology: a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy. I set out to understand what student trip leaders experienced through their training and backcountry leadership as well as how they experienced the affair (Moustakas, 1994). My hope is
that this data leads toward the establishment of a low-level theory that can be tested and used within outdoor orientation programs across the nation.

I recognize that I am not testing empirical outcomes, but listening for and recording perceived outcomes. However, this does not diminish the value of the findings. Perceived outcomes are powerful, especially when consistently generated. Additionally, in this case, perceptions of leadership experience are as valid as some quantified measurement that may or may not achieve formal reliability.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage to using a qualitative research approach is the inability to generalize my findings. At this point, however, too little is known to confidently select a construct for quantitative measurement. Theory regarding trip leader experience is needed, and a qualitative methodology is the best method of inquiry at this time because of its ability to generate rich descriptions and nuanced understanding of the life experiences of individuals who experience a given event or phenomenon (Schram, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

**Research Methods**

**Setting**

This study was conducted at four outdoor orientation programs at private colleges and universities. Data was collected on campus at these institutions and at their respective basecamp and outdoor program sites.
Two of the institutions are evangelical Christian colleges and members of both the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (www.cccu.org) and the more selective Christian College Consortium (www.ccconsortium.org). The other two schools are not members of the council or the consortium. One is an Ivy League university and the other a prestigious private college in New England. All four institutions have reputations for academic excellence and are highly selective.

As of the 2012 census, there were 185 confirmed outdoor orientation programs operating at colleges and universities within the United States and 3 programs in Canada (Bell & Starbuck, in press). The process for selecting programs to participate in this study involved the following two considerations. First, I sought well-established programs. Of the 185 programs in existence, 115 were developed since the 2006 census. The four programs in this study were chosen from the pool of established programs and have been operating for over 30 years. Second, I sought programs that were led by college student leaders trained in a program of leadership development. This is the most common model for trip leader training. Some well-established programs employ unique student leadership development models; they were not included in this study.

The private institutions hosting the four programs in the study have an undergraduate enrollment of between 1,500 and 2,400. An estimated 200
to 400 students participate in each outdoor orientation program each year. The four programs take students into the backcountry and embrace the challenge as a catalyst for growth and learning.

As I presented findings from the pilot study to professionals in outdoor education, dozens of program directors I spoke with stated the belief that their leaders were benefitting significantly from their leadership experience, though an understanding of the specific nature of those benefits was often unclear. Many program directors offered me research access to their student leaders. I chose the four schools that would best answer my research questions. All four institutions granted me access to their sample and provided me with logistical support and IRB approval.

Sample

I interviewed 36 outdoor orientation program student trip leaders from four institutions. The sample included 16 male students and 20 female students. There were no fewer than eight students interviewed at any of the four schools. Students' class designation ranged from sophomores to seniors. To minimize maturity threats, I interviewed first-time leaders as opposed to leaders who had led for multiple years.

Internal Review Board Approval

I obtained Internal Review Board approval from the University of New Hampshire as well as each hosting institution. Outdoor orientation program directors proved quite helpful in this endeavor. I created
institution-specific consent forms and gave two copies to each potential respondent. Each program director agreed to read the document in the presence of his or her student leaders and collected signed copies to return to me via prepaid mailing envelopes that I had provided.

Additionally, before each student interview, I read the following statement and obtained recorded verbal consent before collecting further data:

This study is seeking to learn more about the student trip leader experience. I encourage you to be honest about the good, bad, and everything in between as it relates to your personal leadership experience. Your name will not be used at any point during the study, and your input is anonymous. You have the right to choose not to answer any question within the interview and to stop the interview at any time you desire should you feel uncomfortable for any reason. Because this is a formal research study, I will record our conversation. Is that all right with you? (Proceed after affirmation.) Are you ready to begin?

Transcripts from these interviews document occasional reminders of informed consent and the rights of interviewees. If a student expressed verbal or nonverbal hesitancy to answer any question, I reminded them of their ability to decline response.

**Data Collection**

The data collection procedures I utilized include a post-trip response essay and an in-depth post-trip interview. I gathered all data between August 2012 and January 2013.

**Post-Trip Response.** Immediately following their training and trip experience, student leaders completed an open-ended response essay. The response was limited to one page, and the only prompt given was
"describe your leadership experience." Informed consent was attained by having program directors read the IRB-approved informed consent forms to students, provide them with the opportunity to participate or not to participate, and accept signed forms from those wishing to be a part of the study. Program directors then offered the prompt to the student leaders. Three of the four programs designated a set time before or after a "group debrief" meeting to write the response. One program collected consent forms and explained the prompt before sending students back to their residence halls on the last day of the trip. The post-trip response was designed specifically for this study and originated from a desire to capture the lived experience immediately after leading.

Phenomenological Interviews. I conducted 36 semistructured, in-person interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) during the 2012 fall semester. Students were interviewed on campus at their school. Though interviews could have been conducted immediately after the student leaders finished their trip, I decided to provide the time and space of a few months between the experience and the interview.

I had two reasons for this decision. First, it was a matter of practicality and respect for the individuals I would be interviewing. Students transition into a new school year immediately after a trip; it is a characteristically hectic time for students and it would prove difficult to set up interviews. Second, I did not think some of the changes would be
understood or well articulated by students who had just finished an intense, emotionally charged flurry of events that may have left them exhausted. Time can clarify lessons, changes, and perceptions of general significance of any life experience. It is also helpful in allowing the post-trip euphoria (Newes, 2001)—the tendency for people to be unequivocally positive immediately following these experiences—to dissipate, limiting the possibility of positively skewed findings. However, I did not want to allow too much time to pass, since the college years are already a time characterized by change and multifaceted personal growth. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conclude from several comprehensive higher education research literature reviews that “consistent cognitive, attitudinal, value, and psychosocial changes” take place within college students (p. 577). The students I interviewed were given the difficult task of untangling the value and significance of their trip leadership experience from their college experience. This reality heightened the need to conduct interviews relatively quickly after the experience. Therefore, I decided upon a time frame of two to four months, and interviews were conducted from November 1, 2012 to January 21, 2013. The time frame provided opportunities for reflection and life experiences following a student’s outdoor orientation leadership role. Waiting more than four months could have increased the potential to conflate the influence of the leadership experience with other
developmental or environmental factors affecting students during their college years. There is no ideal time frame to mitigate the tension between the benefit of more time for students to be able to understand, contextualize, and articulate their experience and the challenge of associating too much or not enough change to an experience as it fades into the recesses of fallible human memory.

Seidman (2006) recommends a "three-interview structure" for phenomenological inquiry and warns against researchers conducting "one-shot" interviews with respondents they have never met (p. 17) because of contextualization concerns. Because the issue of context is significant, I had originally planned to conduct the study with 10 to 12 students while adhering to Seidman's three-interview structure. However, the predictable availability of the respondents as they experienced the phenomenon of being trained and leading an outdoor orientation trip provided a unique opportunity to capture similar data in a more efficient manner. Rather than limiting the sample size and conducting three interviews with each respondent, I created the post-trip response essay to capture initial thoughts, feelings, reactions, reflections, etc., immediately after the experience. Many responses were written in a personal, trusting manner and provided a foundation for understanding the experience before the interviews began. Following the post-trip response, one interview was conducted with each student leader.
Many phenomenological studies investigate lived experiences that do not coincide so neatly, but trip leaders experience the events being investigated simultaneously and conclude the experience together, creating an ideal opportunity for the post-trip response essay. Furthermore, by limiting the number of interviews, I was able to triple the number of respondents whose perspective could be included in the project, enriching the findings through those additional perspectives. Though three separate interviews were not conducted with each respondent, the guidance committee and I believed that pairing the post-experience response with the interview would provide nuanced, rich data and address the research questions of this study appropriately.

Interviews were conducted on the students’ college or university campus. The guidelines I considered when choosing a space for the interviews included a concern for the interviewees. I wanted them to feel:

• Comfortable during the interview
• Safe enough to share their experiences candidly
• Able to get to and from the interview location without undergoing unnecessary travel inconvenience

Additionally, as a researcher, I required a space that was:

• Quiet enough for a conversation to be recorded and transcribed
• Free of distractions
• Private enough to protect student confidentiality
When possible, I reserved study rooms in library buildings, two rooms in administrative office buildings, and an office in the outdoor program office. The interviews held in the outdoor program office were private, and the program director intentionally avoided the interview site to promote candid responses. I declined two offers to meet in a coffee shop because they failed to meet multiple criteria listed above.

**Interview Protocols**

**Question Structure.** I used pilot study data and post-trip response papers to generate a list of questions for the interviews. The first four questions offered opportunities to get to know the student, contextualize this experience, and understand its interaction with prior experiences deemed relevant by the interviewee. Questions 5 through 11 offered the opportunity to discuss the leadership experience in detail, examining the students' perceptions of the experience before, during, and after the training and trip. Questions 12 through 16 offered students the chance to discuss the significance and meaning of the events in their life. Question 17 was an open-ended, final query designed to check for significant data not already discussed and provide students with an opportunity to expound on ideas where they felt it to be appropriate. I developed questions with feedback from my committee and used Seidman's (2006) text to recognize and avoid asking leading questions. I constructed the following questions to providing opportunities for students to discuss
positive experiences as well as problematic or negative effects of their involvement with the program. Interviews were based on the following list of questions:

1. How many trips have you led? When have you led?

2. Were any of your past life experiences relevant to your decision to become a trip leader?

3. Please describe some of the most meaningful experiences.

4. Before leading a trip, had you ever found yourself in other leadership roles or opportunities to be in positions of responsibility?

5. When was the first time you thought, "I want to be a trip leader"?

6. When you first decided that you wanted to lead, what were the reasons you wanted to do it?

7. What feelings did you have BEFORE your leadership experience?

8. You mentioned feeling (insert student’s response) about your trip experience. Where do you think this feeling came from?

9. Did your feelings change as the trip happened?

(Ask questions 8 and 9 separately for each emotion mentioned.)

10. Have your feelings about leading a trip changed as you look back on your experience now?

11. Since you had that experience over two months ago, have you thought about anything you would do differently during the experience? Is there anything you wish you could do “over?”

12. Was there anything different about you after your experience as a trip leader?

13. Thinking about the time between your leadership experience and the present, can you think of two to three things that you’ve done differently as a result of being a trip leader?
14. You mentioned (insert student’s response) as a result of your trip leadership experience. How do you think that might change the way you react to situations in the future? Could you give me an example?

15. When you say (insert student’s response), what do you mean?

16. Have you taken any specific actions or made plans for the future based on this experience?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me regarding your experience as a trip leader and any growth you experienced?

This list provided a semistructured outline that was generally followed, though not strictly binding. As interviewees explored ideas related to their experience, I allowed the interviews to progress organically.

**Question Development.** After my first interview, I realized that my last question was leading and thus changed the wording from "the growth" to "any growth." The revised question read: "Is there anything else that you would like to share with me regarding your experience as a trip leader and any growth you experienced?" This question was helpful in giving students an opportunity to re-form their thoughts and offer refined descriptions of the value they attributed to their leadership experience. It also provided an open-ended opportunity to offer new directions to the conversation and served as a check against missing any ideas that the interviewees deemed important.

At about my 15th interview, I began to recognize some commonalities and differences between the outdoor orientation leadership experience and other prior life experiences in which the
student held a role of responsibility. Curious to explore the connection between prior leadership and this more current experience, I added the following question for the next 21 interviews: "Could you have gotten the same benefits from leadership experiences in a frontcountry environment?" I intentionally asked this question near the end of the interview, after respondents had expressed a variety of ways in which they had benefitted from the experience. The addition of this question provided helpful angles on understanding the data already being coded for "uniqueness of the outdoor orientation leadership experience."

A question that I initially had considered deleting from the interview did provide good data: "Since you had that experience two months ago, have you thought about anything you would do differently during the experience? Is there anything you wish you could do "over?" In hindsight, I was glad I included it in the conversations. The answers provided data that clarified program goals as understood by the student leaders.

Another question that seemed straightforward to me but tended to generate puzzled looks or a "Could you clarify the question?" response from time to time was: "Have your feelings about leading a trip changed as you look back on your experience now? (If so, how?)" This question followed two others that deal with emotions toward the experience of leading a trip. The first question asks about feelings before the trip, the second about how those feelings changed as the trip happened, and this
third about feelings after the experience. It did generate helpful insight, but there were a number of students who needed additional explanation for this question.

Few interviews progressed systematically from one question to the next, though I did ask most of the questions to each interviewee. Students were typically very eager to discuss their experience, and conversation was not difficult to generate. Where appropriate, I asked open-ended follow-up questions with the goal of exploring the individual's perception of his or her experience (Seidman, 2006).

Early in the interview process, I recognized personal active listening habits that I feared could be problematic. I began to realize how often I respond to others with affirmative words such as "Yes," "Great," or "That's awesome!" Out of concern that these affirmative words could hinder the data generation process, I spoke with one of my committee members. Through the conversation, I learned that some aspects of researcher rapport are crucial to the data-gathering process and generally created by treating interviewees as individuals with respect and showing value for their opinions. Seidman (2006) discusses this idea and highlights the importance of developing a relationship that is "friendly without being friends" (p. 97), maintaining a rapport that invites honest, candid responses while simultaneously upholding appropriate distance to avoid exploitation of respondents. In subsequent interviews, I intentionally used
neutral words or phrases such as "Okay," "I understand," or "I see what you mean" in the active listening process.

**Data Treatment**

**Security.** Interviews were digitally recorded and downloaded to my personal computer. Students' names were masked by the provision of a number (e.g., Leader 22) and are cited throughout this dissertation as such. Digital recordings of the interviews and the transcribed interview documents were stored on my computer and backed up to an encrypted cloud server. To further protect anonymity, all recordings were deleted at the completion of the study.

**Transcription.** After transcribing the first interview by hand, I decided to send out the remaining 35 interview recordings for professional transcription. I chose a highly rated transcription company that advertised a guaranteed 99 percent accuracy rate. Thirty-two of the transcribed interviews were well done. Two required me to transcribe a great deal of the recording myself. As I analyzed and coded the data, I checked the recorded interviews against their transcription documents for accuracy, especially when a word or phrase did not make sense. Visualizing the interviews as I coded them, and remembering the feel of the room, sound of the student's voice, and time of day helped me remember the content they shared and recognize any errors in the transcriptions.
Coding

Before coding my data, I enrolled in a two-day intensive workshop to become familiar with a CAQDAS research program called NVivo. This workshop helped me become proficient with the software analysis tool, understanding its potential and recognizing its limitations.

First Cycle. Initially, I employed holistic coding as described by Saldana (2009), coding paragraphs or more according to their conceptual essence. Occasionally, codes would overlap, and the same section could be coded (or partially coded) to multiple themes. This was very helpful with analysis: It provided access to data that may not have otherwise been included in a particular code but rather listed under one specific theme.

Second Cycle. The process of coding qualitative interviews is cyclical. "Data are not coded—they’re re-coded" (Saldana, 2009, p. 45). As codes were created, refined, deleted, and re-created, data from previously coded transcripts needed to be revised and re-coded. During the second cycle of coding, data was coded within nodes. For example, within the "Responsibility" node, additional analysis was needed to determine what students felt responsible for and what that responsibility meant to them. Connections between nodes and a general synthesis of the data as it related to the research questions at hand began to emerge during this process.
Emerging Skillset as a Qualitative Researcher. "There is no substitute for total immersion in the data" (Seidman, 2006, p. 128). The concept of total immersion summarizes my coding experience. For weeks on end, I read and reread every line of every transcript generated from my interviews. I learned that qualitative research is a conceptually rich and mentally draining task. However, I discovered that my passion for the data fueled an excitement that carried me through the tedious work of thorough analysis. As the process developed, I found encouragement in recognizing the development of my own skill set in this area.

Creswell (2007) recommends a structures approach to data analysis as presented by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas' steps, which were helpful tools for data analysis in this study, include:

- Identifying significant statements
- Creating meaning units
- Clustering themes
- Advancing textural and structural distinctions
- Making a composite description of textural and structural descriptions into an exhaustive description of the essential invariant structure (or essence) of the experience

Development of initial nodes was cumbersome, and I found myself often revising definitions of nodes or creating multiple nodes that represented a common construct in my desire for consistency and rigor. However, throughout the process, I recognized noticeable improvement in my ability to code quickly and effectively. As the data reached saturation, and as my nodes evolved, meaning units and themes emerged. I
reached a high level of confidence that my coding strategy was an accurate representation of the lived experiences as understood by the student leaders.

**Program Overviews**

I gathered information from formal and informal interviews with program directors, program brochures and leader training manuals, program websites, and marketing brochures. In addition, I analyzed program similarities and differences using data generated from the 2012 Outdoor Orientation Program Census (Bell & Starbuck, in press). As I discuss the unique aspects of the four programs, I will refer to them as programs A, B, C, and D. Programs A and B are faith-based, rooted in an evangelical Christian worldview. Programs C and D are not faith-based. Because one of the criteria I used in program selection was a commonly utilized model for trip leader training and co-leadership experiences, the four programs included in this study inevitably shared many similar practices. All incorporate certain trip elements, such as facilitated ropes course experiences, structured first-year experience conversations facilitated by upper-class student leaders, and the guided sharing of a personal life narrative or life story. All require a minimum of basic first aid training and certification through either Stonehearth Open Learning Opportunities (SOLO; www.soloschools.com) or Wilderness Medical Associates (WMA; www.wildmed.com). The programs share the goals of
preparing students for social success in college, helping students establish a sense of personal identity, and improving the campus community or culture. Primary programmatic differences discussed below include the date of origin, length of trips, difference in training methods, and additional goals. Table 2 illustrates programmatic similarities and differences across the four programs.

Table 2: Outdoor Orientation Program Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Faith Based?</th>
<th>Trip Length in Days</th>
<th>Estimated Number of Annual Participants</th>
<th>Are Faculty Directly Involved?</th>
<th>Minimum Medical Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program A</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>WAFA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program B</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>WFR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program C</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4 or 6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>WFA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program D</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>WFA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Program A**

Founded in 1970, this is one of the five oldest programs in the country (Bell, et al., 2010). Originally a branch of YoungLife (younglife.org), the program was influenced significantly by Outward Bound (OB) and incorporated many elements of the OB process from its inception (popularized by Walsh & Golins, 1976; Kalisch, 1979). Unique program elements include a 48-hour solo and fast to reflect on the trip and the year ahead; and a worship service and celebration the last night during which participants from multiple trips come together to socialize, tell stories about their experiences, and set goals for the upcoming year. Trips
are 12 days in length. In addition to the goals mentioned above, this program aims to foster spiritual growth and promote healthy living habits among participants. Leaders often prepare Biblical, theological, or personal faith narrative lessons to share with participants, and conversations about spiritual topics are expected to occur. Unlike most programs, trips are offered to incoming students throughout the summer. Some students may participate in June and return home for as long as six weeks before returning to campus to begin their first year of college.

Program B

Program B began as a camp. It provided wilderness trips immediately upon its inception in 1951. The founding director was influenced by Colorado Outward Bound, and sent a team of individuals to Colorado for training. In 1969, the team returned to apply the principles and model of OB to a first-year outdoor orientation program, making it also one of the five oldest programs in the country. In addition to wilderness tracks, this program offers an urban track and a camp-based track. Approximately 30 percent of the incoming students participate, with 70 percent doing the camp track, 10 percent doing the urban track, and 20 percent doing the wilderness track. All leaders in this study led in the wilderness context. Trips are single gender, an element unique to this program in this study. Leaders experience six weeks of training, including 4 days of backpacking, 4 days of sea kayaking, medical training, and 14 days of
theory and spiritual-formation training. The last week of program planning is used to plan Bible studies and trip logistics. As with Program A, student leaders often prepare biblical, theological, or personal faith narrative lessons to share with participants, and conversations about spiritual topics are expected to occur. Significant differences between this program and others include a single-gender cohort model (the three other programs have co-ed groups), the amount of training students receive, the number of days spent leading, the length of the outdoor orientation program trip, and the involvement of faculty in the outdoor orientation experience.

Additional goals include fostering spiritual growth, promoting healthy living habits (e.g., exercise, nutrition), providing a positive recreation experience, and orienting students to the liberal arts mission of the college. Participants in the program experience a daylong solo. Another primary difference of this experience is that students lead a 28-day wilderness leadership program with high school students before they lead with their peers. Another significant difference is the length—this program includes 12 days in the wilderness and 5 days at an off-campus camp where faculty mentors join each group. All trips occur simultaneously before the traditional campus orientation program begins.

**Program C**

Program C is housed at an Ivy League university. It began in 1984, when two students who had just completed a National Outdoor Leadership
School (NOLS) course successfully proposed the idea to the administration of the institution. The program strives to promote healthy living habits (e.g., exercise, nutrition), provide a positive recreation experience for incoming students, and foster respect for the environment. Trips are either four or six days in length. This program places a high value on evening campfire talks. Leaders for the following fall are selected in March; leader training involves an initial meeting after selection, a day hike, an equipment training day, a CPR class, and a two-day camping trip covering technical and interpersonal skills and program policies. Once students come back from the summer, they have five more days of training, including wilderness first aid training by SOLO. All trips occur simultaneously before the traditional campus orientation program begins.

**Program D**

The primary goals of this program are to have fun, ask questions, and get ready for college. Trips include a four-day wilderness trip and a two-day ropes course experience. The program seeks to intentionally spread out the groups to help them meet more people and integrate with others in the incoming class. Training happens in May between finals and graduation. There are five days of training in both technical and interpersonal skills. Four of those days are spent in the field. (I mean this in a literal sense: The students pitch their tents in a field on campus property.) Primary activities available during the four-day portion of the experience
include backpacking, canoeing, climbing, kayaking, or a combination. All trips occur simultaneously before the traditional campus orientation program begins.

**Activities Offered**

Table 3 illustrates the diversity of adventure activities or programmatic opportunities offered in each program. All programs offer backpacking, Leave No Trace (Int.org) training, and some form of initiative exercises. Three of the four programs offer canoeing, sea kayaking, challenge course, map/compass, and service activity options. The two faith-based programs incorporate a solo experience. Only one program offers whitewater rafting and trip options for farming or urban adventure.

**Table 3: Program Activities Offered by Programs A-D**
All four programs provided rich data regarding the student leader experience. Findings from this data are presented in the next three chapters.

Student trip leaders from four programs participated in this study. Despite program differences and some varying goals, there are many similarities within the lived experience of training for and leading an outdoor orientation program trip. Chapter 4 will analyze student leader perceptions of the value of the outdoor orientation experience as well as the value students ascribe to themselves as facilitators of the experience. Chapter 5 will focus on the leadership experience as it happened, examining student leader emotions and the impact of projecting competence. Chapter 6 will describe the significance of their leadership role as a positive shift in their confidence, leadership self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and identity. These observations collectively represent a composite description of the "essential invariant structure" (Moustakas, 1994) of the student leadership experience for the 36 individuals who led in these specific outdoor orientation programs.
CHAPTER IV

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF THE OUTDOOR ORIENTATION TRIP

In this chapter, findings demonstrate how outdoor orientation student leaders understand the importance of the outdoor orientation program trip and the significance of their role within the structure of the experience. Pseudonyms are used in place of the actual names of the student leaders who participated in the study. The student-held belief that the trip is an important experience is illustrated by student reasons for leading and student perceptions of responsibility.

**The Importance of the Trip Leadership Role**

Students who participated in this study described the experience as an important event for themselves and their participants. Nate had previous leadership experience as captain of a creative problem solving team in high school. The importance he placed on the outdoor orientation trip leadership experience is illustrated in the following quote:

I think that there is a moment when you’re leading where it all clicks, where you say that this program works . . . especially having experienced it from one side and then switching to the leader position. [You see] it work and realize how that worked on you, and how it made your personal transition into college a lot easier, and how it helped you become what you want to be and do what you want to do. You realize the deep underlying methods of this. Above all of the fun and silly games and the enjoyment that we
The final words of the preceding quote are italicized because they were emphasized by Nate’s body language. Though not all students directly stated the importance of the trip, many communicated it indirectly. As students discussed their reasons for wanting to lead a trip, many indicated their perception of the importance of the trip in their lives and a subsequent desire to provide a similar meaningful experience for others.

**Reasons for Leading a Trip**

Few students who became trip leaders had prior wilderness leadership experience. Beth had completed an immersion semester in outdoor education, where she had experienced three days of facilitated leadership with feedback. Ruth had led high school trips for a non-university program. Four students, all from the faith-based programs, had been counselors at summer camp programs but had not led wilderness trips. Of the 36 students, 5 had been backpacking prior to their first outdoor orientation program trip (Amanda, Kylie, Tim, Joy, and Rob). While these five students had minimal backpacking experience from family trips or other programs, the majority of the students had never been backpacking prior to their participation in the outdoor orientation program. When asked about the reasons they wanted to lead a trip, students described the trip they participated on as a first-year student
positively, indicating that the meaningfulness of that experience created a desire to provide similar experiences for incoming students.

**The Positive Participant Experience**

The most common reason for leading an outdoor orientation trip was the sense of value and importance students placed upon their own trip experience as an incoming student. This remained true across all four programs. It was usually the first reason stated by student leaders.

- "I went on [an outdoor orientation program trip] my freshman year. That was big for me." (Daniel)

- "When I did [outdoor orientation] coming into [college], I basically knew right after loving that, that I wanted to try and be a leader." (Lydia)

- "I tend to be more quiet and reserved, so having friends already just made a difference, and I wanted to be able to do that for other people. I think that was a big reason why I was really drawn... I felt like I had something to offer to whoever was on my trip." (Jill)

- "I had such an amazing time on my [participant] trip that I knew I wanted to be a part of this." (Stella)

Most students spoke fondly of their participant experience. Some students elaborated on why their participant trip was helpful. Experiencing social integration and developing a love of nature were the two strongest contributing factors.
Social Integration. Students discussed the benefits of being socially integrated into a small group and a larger community as they came to campus for the first time. They described social integration as a feeling of belonging to a peer group that accepts and appreciates them as an individual.

I definitely wanted to have that same impact on other freshman because when I went on my [first] trip, so many of my questions about the things that are not in brochures and stuff were sort of answered. I got much more of a feel of what the campus is about and, more than anything, I was made to feel very welcome and [that] people were interested in me; upper classmen were interested in me, and it made me feel more integrated because I would run into my [program] leaders, and they would be introduce me to their junior and senior friends who were people I never would have met otherwise. It just really expanded the depth of my social circle out of the freshman class. Then, more than that, I came into freshman year with six really good friends, four of whom I actually live with now. (Brandy)

Social integration into the campus was recognized as a valuable outcome across all four programs. Simply having access to what Cuseo (2010) describes as “successful upperclass peers” was important to incoming students. “I had an awesome time on my own trip as a participant, and I had great leaders who I really respected and looked up to” (Scott). Current student leaders recall feeling a sense of appreciation for the social connections generated from the experience.

Well, when I was on [my participant trip], I had a really good experience. It completely turned my expectations around from what I [thought] it [would] be. I was so worried that I wasn’t going to know [or] like people on my trip. I think I was just so nervous
about coming to school, in general, that I was really overwhelmed
by the thought of having to go early and spend days in the woods,
but I actually really liked it. I liked the [program] games that you
play. I love those games, and I had a really good time. I really liked
getting to know people, and you just talk on the trail. You just have
a very isolated goal. Then, when I got to campus, I saw the
community of the leaders, and I saw the other people that were
considering being [trip] leaders, and some of them were my friends.
We became friends because of the connection. I think the
community is really important, too. (Chloe)

This student remembers feeling overwhelmed at the thought of coming to
school early, but states that the experience that had heightened her fears
actually provided a social network that eased her transition into the
collegiate community. Not all students become close friends through the
outdoor orientation trip experience, but that did not necessarily detract
from their positive regard toward the program.

I loved my participant trip. [It] was interesting because ... a lot of
people are like, 'You could meet your best friend [on the trip],' and
stuff like that. I'm not close with anyone on my trip anymore. We all
say, 'Hi,' to each other, [we have a] common bond thing (Chris).

Within the 36 leaders I interviewed, none mentioned hostile, unfriendly, or
damaging relationships with other students after their experience.

**Love of Nature.** The second shared factor that contributed to the
positive perception of their first-year outdoor orientation program
participant experience was an opportunity to enjoy nature and outdoor
activity. For many students, the trip created or fostered a love of outdoor
recreation. Students frequently expressed their appreciation for nature,
and some of them had not been backpacking before their participant trip.

- "I loved being in the woods." (Amanda)

- "One [reason I wanted to be a leader] was the love for the outdoors and being outside. I enjoy that environment." (Jackson)

- "Of course I love the outdoors. I love hiking, canoeing, kayaking, all of those things." (Nate)

- My interest in the outdoors was, I would say, my initial motivator to look into being a [trip] leader." (Scott)

Some students brought a love of nature from past life experiences, while others did not. Amy described herself as a "city girl" who, prior to her participant trip, viewed trees on the side of the road as a wilderness context. In an attempt to describe how uncomfortable she was in the outdoors before her outdoor orientation experiences, she described the city where she grew up: "It's like city, city, city—buildings" (Amy). This student and eight others interviewed in this study reported an increase in personal outdoor recreation as a direct result of experiences within the outdoor orientation program.

**Counterexample: Negative Participant Experience**

One student recalled "hating" her participant experience (Maria). Even though she had previously enjoyed a wilderness backpacking experience and embraced the challenge of the endeavor, she did not enjoy her outdoor orientation participant trip.
Interviewer: Were there any past life experiences that were relevant to your decision to become a trip leader?

Maria: Yes, I actually was a counselor in training at Camp [Name] and had my first leadership experience there. We went on a four-day trip, which seemed like forever back then. We went hiking.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Maria: I was 17. We went hiking up Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Maria: Yeah, and it was sweet and so much fun and I really enjoyed it. It was really challenging and I liked that it was so challenging. It was kind of like, yeah, you're in the wilderness, you see God at work, especially to your Christian counselors and it was just really invigorating being able to say 'Wow, I hiked 10 miles today. I can do this.' [So] when I saw the signup for being a freshman [trip] participant, I was like, "Ah, man. I should totally do this. This sounds so fun." I signed up and then, actually, believe it or not, I thought it was extremely difficult and I hated it. [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter] Nice!

Maria: I know and then through a really funny series of events through God really working in my heart [and] seeing all the experiences that were affected by that trip post that, I decided to sign up and be a leader.

I asked a follow-up question to inquire why Maria had such strong negative feelings about her participant experience. I was especially interested because I had already conducted over a dozen interviews and had not heard anyone mention negative feelings toward their participant experience.

Interviewer: What were some of the biggest challenges with your own trip?
Maria: With my own trip? I think my trip wasn't horrible overall. Looking back on it now it was a pretty good trip. There was some difficulties in there, but I just had a really bad attitude going into it and I knew that part of that was me feeling like a) taking what the leaders told me too personally and b) just feeling like I didn't belong or that these girls were just too happy and I was just too spunky, or, I don't know. It was really hard for me to connect with my leaders and I don't know, I feel like they cared about me as an individual as opposed to just something that they are going to check off on their list of "I've done this at [college] and aren't I great?!" It was also really hard, too, because we went through some pretty horrific natural disaster kind of things. We had to do lightning position in the rain for like, I don't know, it was like five hours and it was in the middle of the night. I only had cotton clothing on because they didn't tell me what I needed to bring, so they made me take off my pants. I'm like in there like in my underwear freezing and I wanted to die. I was like, "This sucks. This is horrible," and the entire time they ... I don't know they weren't ... it was more like they were treating us like subordinates as opposed as to like people, so that's why I wanted to lead it and be like, "Hey, I'm your peer, but I have more experience with [college] and I'm a little further in my walk with Christ. Not by much." Some of my girls were really mature. Yeah, I just wanted to redeem it for myself and make it a really good experience for them.

Interestingly, Maria assumes partial responsibility for the attitude she brought into the experience. She had difficulty with the leaders and resented being treated as a "subordinate." Additionally, Maria seems to have been instructed to proceed with very poor risk-management decisions. Best practices typically do not recommend placing students in the rain as a precaution against lightning, because doing so can add the threat of hypothermia to the existing threat of lightning. In this student's situation, this decision was further exacerbated by the physically and
emotionally dubious advice to remove her pants in the rain. Despite the feelings she had about her experience, Maria did decide to lead a trip. She applied to be involved with other aspects of the program, but chose to accept a trip leadership opportunity when told of the need for a trip leader.

I really thought about it and I prayed about it and I was like, 'You know what? Might as well as just apply. See what it is.' At first I applied and I got in and I told them that I wasn't going to [be a trip leader] because I hated it. I didn't want to go back, but through working this summer and leading the trip with all of the juniors, sophomores and juniors in high school I was like, 'No, I need to do this.' Also, [the program director] was like, 'Please. We need you.' I was like, 'Okay. I'm going to do it to redeem my experience and make it awesome.' It turns out God really spoke through it and it was a really cool experience. (Maria)

Maria hoped to lead in a relational, caring manner. She hoped to give her participants a better experience than her own.

I wanted to do everything right that I thought my [trip] leaders had done wrong. I really wanted to paint a realistic picture of what [college] was like as opposed to, "It's all great. It's all awesome." I always told my [participants], "I have a love/hate relationship with [college]. I love the community, but sometimes it can be really difficult and the classes can be really daunting." Also, I wanted to make sure that I was... I just felt very strongly about being realistic with where I was as opposed to being like, "Come on, [participants]. We can all do this." Just showing like, "This is really hard for me, too. We can do this last five miles after doing 10 miles," or, "Man, I'm so hungry. How you guys feeling?" As opposed to, "I'm the leader and I'm perfect." Those were feelings that were really strong. (Maria)

Being a spiritual mentor was important to her, but only within the context of being genuine and open about personal flaws. Maria's perspective
stands out because she was the only leader who reported a negative participant experience. This portion of her narrative highlights the importance of empathetic and interpersonal leadership.

**Paying It Forward**

The phrase "pay it forward" is used to illustrate the act of helping others after being experiencing goodwill. Most students described positive participant experiences in the outdoor orientation program. After students perceived being helped without any expectation of reciprocity, a second major reason they desired leadership was to pay it forward—to provide similar positive experiences for others. Even in the case of the student who did not have a positive experience, this desire was present and possibly even strengthened. Seven student quotes representing the idea of "paying it forward" include:

- "I think the main thing was, I had such a positive experience so I wanted to pay it forward." (Joy)
- "I wanted to be a part of helping others have the same experience that I had." (Jill)
- "I saw where I was as a freshman and I saw what [the program] did for me as a freshman; I thought it would be great if other people could have this experience too." (Daniel)
- "I feel it really worked for me, and I had a really positive experience,
so I wanted to be part of it, give it to other people." (Chris)

- "I knew that if I could be positive and encouraging, and hopefully shape at least a little bit of the incoming freshman experience, I knew I wanted to." (Stella)

- I was naturally drawn to it because I had such a positive experience and I did want to be on the other side, helping re-create that experience for someone else.... I really liked the idea of introducing the next 'me' to [the college]." (Ross)

- I wanted to emulate—I don’t know if that’s the right word—I wanted to re-create some of the experiences I had in the past. I knew it can be informative and healing to be away from those things that distract you so often." (Evelyn)

The value students attribute to this experience is communicated by the consistency of their responses characterized by the desire to give others something special that they themselves had so recently been given. Students expressed positive regard for their outdoor orientation experience and wished to welcome new students into the campus community with encouragement and support.

Ruth further illuminated her understanding of her role within the process by describing herself as a "cog in the machinery of the group."

I wanted to be able to provide the same opportunity or similar
opportunity that I had as a freshman, which was a really intense social experience, by way of an outdoors experience . . . there are a lot of things I do for resume padding but it honestly wasn’t one of those. It had so shaped my own freshman year social experience and I felt so strongly that it’s an incredible program and could do that for future groups of freshman, that I would want to be a cog in the machinery of the group. (Ruth)

Students recognized that they were not the sole provider of these experiences, but simultaneously felt a high degree of responsibility to do everything within their power to make the experience beneficial to their participants.

Programmatically Different Reasons for Leading

Student leaders from all four programs illustrated the perceived importance of the outdoor orientation experience by describing positive participant experiences and how those experiences influenced their social integration into college and their love of nature. A desire to provide a similar (or better) experience for incoming students was also shared by students in all four programs included in this study. Two interesting differences did emerge between the faith-based and non-faith-based programs, both involving a prominent additional reason students wished to lead these trips.

Fostering Spiritual Growth. The faith-based programs included the additional motivation of fostering spiritual growth in their participants and themselves. This will be discussed in detail later, but is illustrated here
briefly by the following quotes:

- "I really like [the program's] holistic approach of pushing people physically but then also how much learning about God and being intentional about seeking out God that is integrated." (Jessica)

- "It seemed like a good way to apply a lot of the learning I do as far as my faith is concerned and [to] try to help other people along in theirs." (Daniel)

- "I was like, 'I love the outdoors and people and girls and we're talking about God. That's great!'" (Anna)

Students in the faith-based program often expressed a desire to mentor, teach, and discuss their faith as it applied to life. Their eyes lit up when talking about issues of faith; students would often lean in and become more animated. They valued the practical outlet outdoor orientation trips gave them to discuss and explore their faith within a community that was being challenged. “I really enjoy seeing people grow and seeing people push themselves beyond what they think they’re capable of” (Jackson). The theme of desiring a leadership position because of the spiritual growth that could come from the experience was common within the faith-based programs but absent within the non-faith based programs.
Membership in the Leader Community. Students in the two non-faith-based programs also shared a pervasive reason for pursuing trip leadership positions that was only mentioned once within the faith-based programs—membership in the trip leader community. Students often paired the desire to impact or mentor incoming students with the desire to join the leader community.

- "I wanted to make that situation for freshmen but, more than anything, I wanted to be connected into that community. It's just such a fun and active community." (Brandy)

- "I just looked at it and said, 'This is exactly what I want to do. I want to be involved with freshmen coming to campus; all of these people who I love are [trip] leaders. It would be great to be a part of this community.'" (Jon)

- "One of the number one things, to be honest, is the unbelievable [leader] community on campus. There's a social core, I'm sure you've heard, that puts together parties and dinners and everything, which are a decent part of it, but just being in the community has changed my entire sophomore year... also, I just really wanted to pass on the feeling that [trip] gave me, like walking into that first day of school." (Warren)

Students in the non-faith-based programs described the trip leader community as an elite status on campus, recognized by insiders and outsiders alike.

People know when you're a [trip] leader. That sort of gives you some level of status immediately but there's a community, so if I wanted to do something, I'm like, "I'm a [trip] leader, you're a [trip] leader" and "Oh! We're friends." In another way, it's like you've been chosen. It's competitive to become one, especially to be chosen to lead a trip as a sophomore. That's an accomplishment. (Grace)

This quote illustrates the social status generated as one is introduced into
the community as well as the value of membership. The fact that the selection process is competitive heightens the perceived status of the role.

But students report not not being simply attracted to the perceived level of social status they attribute to trip leaders; rather, they wish to belong to the community that drives the image. Grace recalled the way in which her trip leader had encouraged her to apply to the program:

"She was like, 'The reason it’s really great is because it’s this amazing community of [trip] leaders on the campus who get together and party during the year, and you make all these friends, and [trip] leaders are the best people on campus.'

Then she paused, leaned forward, and emphatically exclaimed:

I want to be in the collection of the best people on campus!"

(Grace)

This quote communicates the value of membership as an identity-shaping experience. It also lends insight into the extracurricular opportunities offered to members of the trip leader community. Once you join that group, you are given access to a highly active and generally highly esteemed group on campus.

Two students expressed frustration toward the leader community. Joy criticized aspects of the typical trip leader persona while embracing the community. Her statement within her post-trip response is helpful in understanding her frustration with the projected image of many trip leaders—one she describes as merely a "veneer."
I am not what you might call a "typical" trip leader: I am pretty reserved, like to spend most of my time by myself/with one or a few of my close friends, and am really, really not into group games. But I think these deviations from the trip norm are probably what make me a good leader. It can be hard to approach the person who's constantly out-funning (at least in appearance) everyone else. In truth, it often seems like all trip leaders fall into the insanely high-energy/oh-my-gosh-everything-is-soooo-fun/we're-all-so-ruggedly-attractive-aren't-we?! category. But that's just a veneer (albeit, one freshman are nearly incapable of seeing through). Each trip leader is unique, and getting to know different leaders below their surface level has been one of the best things about my trip experience. (Joy; punctuation by student)

The above quote was retrieved from Joy's post-trip response paper. While she understands herself as outside the norm of a "typical" trip leader, Joy struggled to define this idea in our interview, eventually settling in on the idea that "[Trip leaders] usually fall into the category of . . . incredibly outgoing and extroverted and tend to feel as if they're responsible for every aspect of the trip." Joy described herself as more introverted and willing to lead with a "hands-off" style. Even so, she valued membership in this group. "Yeah, this is like a group of really solid, for the most part incredibly genuine, nice people who want to do good things and are also total ballers" (Joy). Despite this student's frustration with what she perceived as a stereotypical expectation of persistently happy, enthusiastic, outgoing members of the community, she expressed both respect and appreciation for the members of the group.

Only one other student (Shane) expressed discontent with the leader community and described rejecting the overall social group
altogether, though Shane maintained friendships with a few individuals who were part of that community. Shane's perspective will be discussed in greater detail in the "confidence" portion of this chapter.

Analysis of the four programs revealed a few notable differences in the students' reasons for leading. Across all four programs, students pointed to their personal positive experience with the program—an experience that inspired many of them to lead outdoor orientation program trips in an attempt to provide a positive experience for subsequent groups of incoming students. Students within the two faith-based programs also expressed a desire to grow spiritually and be a part of spiritual growth for their participants. Students within the two non-faith-based programs placed a high value on joining the community of trip leaders and being a part of that social group. The reasons students chose to lead these trips will be helpful in understanding the multifaceted levels of responsibility students experienced during the course of their trips. Both of these meaning units illustrate the level of importance students place upon the orientation trip experience. While this "reasons for leading" section illuminates the perceived value of the outdoor orientation experience itself, the "responsibility of leading a trip" section provides an understanding of the student leader's role and its importance within the program.
Responsibility of Leading a Trip

Students described an array of programmatic elements that they felt responsible to competently manage during their leadership experience. Students indicated that the level of responsibility they accepted increased their perception of the importance of their role. "You feel the weight of responsibility slowly coming down on your shoulders, and you’re like, 'Okay, this is big'" (Jon). Maria expressed that she believed the responsibility of leading a trip had changed her. "because in the past . . . I had not had a lot of responsibility . . . but it was just me and my co, we’re out in the wilderness, so it was kind of like our decisions reigned at the end of the day." The participants of this study felt responsible for at least seven separate aspects of the experience, though not all elements of perceived responsibility were consistent among all programs. Additionally, the perception of responsibility was individualized within each program, though similarities do emerge. Responsibility was not directly tied to any interview question, and if a student did not bring up the topic it was not brought up in a follow-up question. Therefore, many more participants may have discussed this idea directly if given a direct prompt. The following table presents the number of participants who discussed each specific element of responsibility that they perceived within their trip leadership experience.
Table 4: Trip Elements Students Felt Responsible to Manage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Program A</th>
<th>Program B</th>
<th>Program C</th>
<th>Program D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Experience</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding/College Transition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy/Having Fun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Growth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the columns on Table 4 represents the number of students in each program who explicitly described feelings of responsibility toward one of these domains. Even if a student did not use the word "responsibility," but described feelings of responsibility, they were included in the table above. Table 4 identifies programmatic similarities and differences regarding student perceptions of their job as a trip leader. Within all four programs, student leaders felt responsible for the safety, logistics, positive experience, bonding, and successful college transition of their participants. Within the non-faith-based programs, student leaders felt responsible for participants' happiness, fun, and comfort during the trip. This is not to say that students in faith-based programs did not have fun, but leaders did not perceive this as a responsibility of their job.
position. Within the faith-based programs, students felt responsible for the spiritual growth of their participants. Again, this does not mean spiritual growth does not occur within these programs, but student leaders in non-faith-based programs did not understand spiritual growth as a responsibility of their leadership role. It is important to note that 12 of the 16 faith-based program respondents indicated that they or their participants had experienced spiritual growth during the outdoor orientation experience. However, only four students mentioned spiritual growth as an additional aspect of the responsibility of leadership.

Regarding all these elements of responsibility, students often mentioned that the orientation trip was the first time (or one of the first times) they had been entrusted with this much responsibility. This section will first include findings from the common elements of perceived responsibility. Findings specific to the non-faith-based and faith-based programs will follow.

**Safety**

The feeling of responsibility most often cited is directly related to participant safety. Students mentioned feeling this level of responsibility for the first time—some indicating that the idea of being responsible for the lives and well-being of others was overwhelming at times. The responsibility for the safety of others is characterized by the following quotes:
• Just making sure that they were okay. There are a lot of elements out there. I know at night when I would be feeling cold, I thought, “Oh my God, are they really cold?” They say they’re fine, but are they really fine? Little things like that. I think you’re more hyper-aware knowing you’re actually alone in the wilderness. (Lydia)

• Actually, I feel like I only half-slept. (Laughter) Because I was always worried that I would have to pounce up and defend people in the middle of the night. I don’t know. It was my first . . . [time] having responsibility over all of these other people. If I heard a rustle, I was like, “Is everyone okay?” (Chris)

• I felt responsible for their well-being. That was the most important. Getting them fed. Keeping them safe. (Maria)

• Primarily for their safety. I would say that comes first and foremost. (Scott)

• You’re responsible for the safety and well-being of 8 to 10 freshmen, many of whom are leaving home, seriously, for the first time, and the responsibility to their parents and to them. (Jon)

• It’s hard to beat the fact that you’re responsible for eight people’s lives. (Matt)

Because of the wilderness context, student leaders perceived themselves as being alone, somewhat inaccessible, and responsible for the lives of their participants. This was more responsibility than most were accustomed to bearing, as is indicated directly in the following section.

Students recognized their role as the primary healthcare responder in an emergency situation and took the role quite seriously. Some students mentioned that their wilderness medical training heightened their awareness of the possibilities of potential mishap, increasing their perception of the significance of their leadership role. Student leaders
recognized that it was their responsibility to exercise good judgment and keep their participants safe. Amanda held many leadership positions in high school, and accepted leadership on campus even as a first-year student. However, she described the trip leadership role as a new level of responsibility:

I felt responsible for people’s safety, which was kind of a new thing for me. I didn’t feel that so much on my first trip, but after doing my training and realizing like, “Whoa, there are so many things that can go wrong. If any of these things happen, I’m going to be the one that’s in charge and has to fix it.” I felt a lot of responsibility for that. (Amanda)

Amanda remembered a moment when she realized how many things could go wrong in the backcountry. As the first responder in that situation, the possibility of having to deal with an accident was sobering to her. Grace mentioned experiencing similar feelings.

You’re so much more responsible if something happened, if someone had broken their ankle. We didn’t have cell phones with us. No one did break their ankle, but the possibility of that definitely makes it a whole different level. We did go through wilderness medicine stuff, and so I was prepared for that and had that in the back of my mind the whole time. . . . Even through nothing had gone wrong, the worry that it could go wrong definitely required you to take on a whole other level of responsibility. (Grace)

The potential to become a first responder in an emergency medical situation heightened perceived responsibility for the experience. Grace indicated that she did feel ready to handle those possible scenarios—though readiness did not eliminate worry for this student. Lucy explained
feeling confident in her medical training:

I felt responsible for... first aid because I had just had the training and everything, so I felt the most confident about that. I always had the first aid kit and that was even during the first day when I directed a lot of questions towards [my more experienced co-leader]. I had a handle on the first aid kit. I knew what I was doing. (Lucy)

Tim indicated readiness to handle the responsibility of student safety and attributed his confidence to his previous outdoor experiences.

Obviously, I felt responsible for safety, but I felt a lot more confident in that because I've done a lot of that kind of thing before and I feel really confident in the outdoors. (Tim)

Tim had more outdoor leadership experience than most other outdoor orientation program trip leaders. As a Boy Scout, he had earned the Eagle Scout award and became a senior patrol leader, a position that involved leading in the backcountry and taking leadership of planning meetings beforehand. He said that these experiences provided him with confidence to act and avoid indecision. "I feel like I just have to display this confidence no matter what, and that's critical to getting their respect. You can't be indecisive" (Tim).

Safety was the most commonly cited element of responsibility; it was often cited first, followed by additional aspects of the trip for which students understood themselves to be responsible.
Logistics

Students felt responsible for the logistics of the outdoor orientation experience. As the leaders of their group, there were many aspects to the logistics that required attention. “In the beginning, I really felt responsible for the logistics of everything. Okay, getting people from A to B and showing them this and showing them that” (Jessica). Students discussed logistics in terms of having their group arrive at various locations at the appropriate times.

Then, just the logistics of the trip, being where they needed us to be on time and efficiently during rocks and ropes at the end of the trip. During the trip, knowing—wow, this is where we need to go. This is where we have to get to. This is what’s happening every day and being we’re two people who knew all that. That’s a lot of responsibility. (Amanda)

Simply getting the group to the appropriate locations at the appropriate times was understood to be a significant task, but it was only one aspect of the leaders’ logistical responsibility.

I mean, I guess just like planning and thinking through things. You really have to think through absolutely everything. There are just so many hours that were spent before our trip, and then every morning, my co-leader would get up early and look at the map and figure out where we were going to stop for lunch... then we’d talk about every single person on our trip and how they’re doing and what we needed to make sure was going to happen for that person to have a good day. We needed to know where all of the food was at all times [and] make sure to hang our bags at night so bears wouldn’t come and eat it. (Ruth)

Students mentioned the need to utilize outdoor living skills, such as the use
of a backcountry map to manage their logistical needs. This quote also shows that the logistical needs overlapped with interpersonal needs and nutritional needs.

**Positive Experience**

One of the main reasons that students chose to pursue a trip leadership position was their personal positive trip experience as an incoming student. This often inspired them to provide a positive experience to others. Trip leaders felt responsible to facilitate a good experience for participants. This was not always equated with an easy, comfortable experience, as is illustrated by Jackson in the following examples.

Jackson: When I look at myself as a participant of the trip, taking extra gear was obviously something I offered to do that I would offer to do it no problem but as a leader, that was only to make sure that the group got from Point A to Point B. As a leader, I started thinking about how do I take gear in order to allow these people to have a good experience? I think that my responsibility before was [a] more . . . utilitarian kind of responsibility... Whereas my sense of what I had to do after is not necessarily how I make it easier for people but how do I facilitate people, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Talk about it. Say more.

Jackson: How do I enable people to have the most positive experience out of what they’re doing, which isn’t always necessarily getting to Point A to Point B quickest. Which isn’t always lightening their load. Then there’s also times where... I’m really glad I led the trips this summer because playing soccer this season as a senior, we had challenges on the team that I could think back to the [trip] where, okay, this is
directly transferable. For example, if people would be complaining about something. We had a girl sit down in the middle of our bushwhack and just say that she needed a rest despite the fact that we had taken a rest 10 minutes before. We’re planning another one 20 minutes later, then she wasn’t moving. It got to the point where I realized that okay, I need to talk her down because we need to keep moving because we’re six hours in and we’re still not close. Where I think I would have done beforehand because it was frustrating to me but really the success of the group relied on her. I think that conceptualized responsibility a little bit more for me in the sense that it’s not about what you need to do for you. It’s not about you personally, it’s about what you need to do in order to get the collective force.

Jackson describes his attempt to balance logistical concerns with the goal of facilitating a positive but challenging experience. He discusses the personal transition from what he describes as a utilitarian understanding of his responsibility as a leader to a more collaborative style. He understood the most positive experience does not necessarily mean creating an easy, comfortable experience. He understood his responsibility as a leader to include managing logistical needs while attempting to provide the most positive experience possible to participants. Maria, also from a faith-based program, discussed the idea of meaningful challenge:

Whenever I saw a girl struggling, [I made] sure to take her aside and talk to her or find an opportunity to be like, “Hey, what’s up, what’s going on?” Or, “I’m struggling, too. This is really tough, isn’t it?” Making them feel safe and also I felt responsible, as I said before, to paint a good picture of [college] and make sure that they knew what they were getting into, which I felt like I wasn’t properly prepared for. Yeah, and then ultimately providing a good experience for them. Making sure that I did everything that I could
possibly do to create that kind of environment . . . because ultimately, there is challenge involved, but it should be this nice introduction and an enjoyable time of getting to know your peers through purposeful challenge, as opposed to, "I hate this. This sucks. This is so hard. I'm never going to do this again." (Maria)

Maria describes facilitating "purposeful challenge." Students from the non-faith-based programs more often described a positive experience as a fun, happy, comfortable trip. "You’re responsible for making sure your [participants] are happy, which is a very difficult thing to be responsible for" (Brandy).

The above response also illustrates the responsibility of being an ambassador for the institution. Trip leaders are often the first students an incoming freshman will get to know. A few students mentioned feeling more ownership of their institution as they introduced a new cohort to the campus community. One linked his response to adversity with his responsibility to represent the school well. "You have to be the one that responds positively to hardship. You really are—you’re the first impression that these guys are seeing at [college] and in that sense, you have to put your best foot forward, not being fake, but being able to show everything" (Ross). Whether through overcoming adversity or simply enjoying a wilderness trip, all students hoped their participants would have a positive experience on their trip, and that this experience would prepare them in some way to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college.
Bonding

Student leaders reported feelings of responsibility to foster or facilitate relational bonding within their group. "That’s obviously an important part—making sure that they are bonding with each other. That’s what the whole program is for" (Lydia). While true that developing new relationships to ease the college transition is an element within the goal structure of all four programs, it is interesting that students perceived this goal as their personal responsibility. "I wanted my kids to really get along well and come in with a strong yet small base of friends. So I felt responsibility for their transition into college because that can be stressful from high school" (Scott). Students considered the leadership role to be important in the lives of others and accepted responsibility not only for the safety and positive experience of the program, but also for the bonding and success of their students as they entered college. For many students, this was the most intimidating responsibility of all.

I guess I was overwhelmed because I thought it’s a big enough task to lead a wilderness trip with freshmen and I had to get to know six of them. We had six girls [and] I had to get to know all of them . . . I also had to get to know my co-leader. I also had to try and work out would we have conflicts or anything like that. I was more confident by this point in the actual outdoors. I can cook, I can camp, I can do those things, but it was the relation aspects of it that were overwhelming for me. (Evelyn)

Some students recognized their inability to control the relational and social dynamics of their group.
You’re like, "Who are my freshmen going to be? I hope we get along, it’s such a crapshoot." It definitely shows in the first few hours together, everyone’s just sort of on edge, and it’s really hard to connect with your [participants]. Part of that is them coming to college for the first time, it’s terrifying and everyone’s just like, "Ugh," and the leaders are like, "We want them to do right! We want to do this right." It’s hard, it’s very hard. (Jon)

This student and others struggled to articulate exactly what it meant to do the trip “right”; however, their general perspective was that they valued their own outdoor orientation experience highly and wished to provide a similar experience for their participants that would be similarly valued. This student articulated the desire that trip leaders have to facilitate a tight-knit community while recognizing their inability to unconditionally control the group dynamics.

**Spiritual Growth**

Within the faith-based programs, students felt responsible for the spiritual growth of their participants. A rich description of the concept of spiritual growth within both leaders and participants emerged from the faith-based program interviews. As far as responsibility is concerned, students felt accountable for the spiritual lives of their participants. "When we’re on trip, I felt really responsible for the faith of the kids that were in my group.... I think [trip] is a very intimate setting where authority figures can carry a lot of weight in what they say, and what they think, and what they do" (Daniel). Students perceived an authoritative position simply by
accepting their leadership role. "Basically, it's just me and another person
guiding these people. It's a formative experience for their faith. It's a
shock to go out there—not even [for] their faith—just for their lives. We
held a lot of sway. I know how big of a task that is and I felt a lot of
responsibility there" (Daniel).

**Summary**

Students perceived their role within the outdoor orientation
program as important. The primary reason that these students pursued
the position is that they valued their participant experience and wanted
to provide a similar experience for other students. After training and a trip
leadership experience, students reported feeling responsible for the
safety, logistics, positive experience, bonding, successful college
transition, happiness, comfort, and spiritual growth of their participants.
Students believe that the outdoor orientation experience has the
potential to be a positive experience for participants, influencing their
transition to college as well as deeply personal aspects of spirituality and
faith. Student leaders believed their role in the program was meaningful,
involving the potential to impact incoming students in significant ways.
Before the leadership experience begins, students report feeling nervous and apprehensive about their ability to competently lead the trip. As participants arrive, students often perceive the need to project a sense of competence to their participants. They regularly mention feeling the need to appear as though they know what they are doing. Despite initial uncertainty, students typically feel successful and competent as the trip happens, or at least by the end of their leadership experience.

**Nervousness and Excitement Before Trip**

The student leaders who participated in this study rarely felt ready to handle their leadership role. Nervousness before the trip was one of the most consistent themes of the study, appearing in all but two student interviews. Excitement was another emotion mentioned frequently, usually paired with nervousness. Students were primarily concerned about appearing incompetent before their participants. All the elements of responsibility discussed in Chapter 4 emerged within the nervousness
theme as well. Students were nervous about safety, logistics, having a positive experience, and bonding. Students were also apprehensive about their ability to navigate the co-leader relationship; some had additional concerns about their level of physical fitness.

**The Fear of Appearing Incompetent Before Peers**

As the interviews took place, students communicated their excitement nonverbally by smiling, laughing, and signaling dual feelings of nervousness and excitement with their tone of voice. Interestingly, many students also emphasized these two feelings by repeating themselves. "I was definitely nervous. Definitely, definitely nervous. Taking kids who are maybe less than a year, or a year younger than me out into the wilderness and having them . . . be attentive to what you’re asking and sort of hoping that nothing’s going to go wrong . . . definitely nervous" (Nate).

Leading peers was a new challenge for some students. Not knowing whether participants would recognize or respect their authority was coupled with a concern that problems could occur.

Student leaders did not speak about their desire to appear competent as often as they spoke about their fear of appearing incompetent. "I was nervous, very nervous . . . just realizing I have never done this before. I’m going to be leading my peers and if I don’t know what I’m doing, it’s going to be pretty obvious" (Amanda). Another student described her fear at realizing some of her participants would be
older than her. "We get little bios on our group, and two of them were older than I was and the others were a year younger, so I was like, man, I don’t know why I’m a leader" (Anna). Others who led participants who were older mentioned this concern as well, indicating that student leaders derive some assurance from being even one year older than the members of their group. "I don’t even know if I’m in a place to lead people who are my age. I’d rather have them be a few years younger than me" (laughs) (Beth). Before the trip leadership experience began, students’ fear of appearing incompetent was stronger than their desire to appear proficient.

The day of I was super scared and I [thought], "I can’t do this." I think I just psyched myself up because I felt again my lack of knowledge . . . [and felt], "Oh, I don’t know. I’m really scared." I also just didn’t want to scare the participants being like, "Oh, she doesn’t know what she’s doing." I think I was really, really nervous. (Jessica)

This student later summarized the cause of her nervousness as “[Just not wanting to seem incompetent. I think that was what it was” (Jessica).

Though some students also mentioned the desire to appear capable, they more often expressed a fear of appearing incompetent. This theme appears throughout the other trip elements that students reported feeling nervous about.
**Safety**

Similar to the responsibility theme, safety was often mentioned in terms of pre-trip nervousness. Students were concerned about the possibility of their participants getting hurt.

I was very, very, very excited (laughing), but so nervous. I had basically no outdoor skills and while we had training—we got back a week before the kids had to leave. We had that weekend, the last week of classes. In May, we had training, too but I was just so scared out of my mind to take kids into the woods, especially we did the solo program with the outdoor first aid [that] prepared us for impaling and (laughing) loss of limbs. Like, how am I... oh, my kids are going to die. (laughing) I was very, very (laughing) scared. (Stella)

To a certain extent, Stella’s laughter indicated that she was exaggerating her feelings. However, she did express a genuine concern that serious injury could occur. She went on to reiterate her concern for the “worst-case scenarios,” both in terms of safety and group bonding.

I was very nervous. I wanted the kids to get along. [The program director] is really good about preparing us for the worst possible scenarios. I was just petrified that that was what my trip was going to be—these worst-case scenarios. The kids would fight, and I wouldn’t get along with my co-leader, but there really were no worst-case scenarios on the trip. (Stella)

While safety was certainly a concern, Stella recognized that problematic group dynamics were a more realistic possibility. Students attributed some nervousness to training for “worst-case” scenarios. Even though none of these scenarios typically arise on the trip itself, their potential to occur define a salient aspect of the lived experience of trip leaders.
Logistics and Camping Skills

Students felt apprehensive about the array of logistical needs and camp tasks involved in living in the backcountry. "I'm not super practical per se and so I was a little nervous about my . . . wilderness skills" (Grace). Logistical concerns included everything from broad program goals to specific camp tasks. "I was nervous about not understanding the flow of the trip" (Beth). Students expressed concern regarding the overall flow and a variety of individual camp tasks. The specific tasks concerning each individual were different depending upon his or her skill set; however, many students had at least one camping skill that concerned them.

Lessons like stove that are really important and then nervous about getting details, that things can go wrong, (laughs) setting up the stove. It was more of the practical skills that I was nervous about . . . just things that seem very simple but I knew could impact the trip drastically if I forgot something important. (Beth)

Erik expressed concern that he may not be able to successfully navigate without getting lost. "That really got me nervous 'cause it was like I was going to be lost in the woods." Warren expressed concern about general camping skills. "I was very nervous, being a sophomore leader, about my [technical] skills, because our trip, my freshman trip, was really cushy and we had shelters every night." Technical aspects of the backcountry trip proved to be another source of anxiety for the student leaders.
Positive Experience

Students’ desire to provide a positive experience for their participants and their high regard for the potential of the program created nervousness about the trip experience.

I was definitely nervous, just because I put so much value on the trip. I felt like if it was anything else—I know I can lead these kids and they won’t die, but I was really nervous because I wanted to do a really good job making their first week at [college] really great and it actually has such a huge impact on their whole next four years. I know I’m friends with a lot of people on my trip. I did feel nervous because of the responsibility that I knew I was going to have. I was definitely excited to do it. (Tim)

Tim connected his feelings of nervousness, excitement, and desire to provide a positive experience for students with the potential and importance of the outdoor orientation program trip. He was not concerned about participants surviving the experience, but was nervous about supporting them and providing them with the opportunity to thrive over the next four years. Tim believed his role in shaping “their first week” at college was important and worthwhile. Rob, a student from a different institution, echoed this sentiment as well.

I guess I wasn’t scared [of] anything in terms of . . . survival or any outdoor things, first aid. I think I just felt some pressure to make sure that this was a good experience for them, knowing that they were all in a vulnerable spot, having literally just left home. There are some people who come here and go on [trip] and then they become [trip] leaders, and [the outdoor orientation program] defines their experience at [college]. It can be so central to your life at [college]. It doesn’t have to be, so I just had wanted it to be an important experience, but I feel like there are high expectations for trips. Some groups I think exceed those expectations, meet them, and some fall a little bit short. I think it mostly depends on just
how lucky you get with the group dynamics. [The program director] makes this great speech right before you leave, telling the freshmen that this will be one of the most memorable events of your life, one of the greatest experiences of your life, and so immediately there’s just this sense that you’re going to have this really deep, emotional, profound experience out in the woods with these people, and some of them might become your best friends. I just wanted to make sure that I was able to facilitate that, so I was worried.

(Rob)

Rob also indicated a sense of confidence toward the concerns of survival and first aid, though the fact that he even mentioned them indicates his awareness that others have these concerns. His nervousness stems from his desire to provide what the program director describes as “one of the greatest experiences of your life,” a high claim that many leaders accept and believe. Later in the interview, Rob elaborated on this idea further, stating that there is a “legacy of it being a really successful program. People really do meet their best friends for the rest of college and make really meaningful relationships.” Furthermore, he believes that the culture at his highly selective university heighten the importance of “getting started on the right foot.” Rob stated that not all trips achieve this level of experience, but some do, and his desire to create that “important experience” for his participants produced nervousness before the experience began.

**Bonding**

Bonding and social support were perceived to be a significant goal of each program. Many students recalled feeling nervous about the
dynamics of the group prior to their trip. “I was really nervous about
meeting my kids. The biggest thing that I was nervous about was, ‘What if
there’s a bad social dynamic?’ Because that makes it super awkward”
(Chris). Students spoke frequently of group dynamics, bonding, and
chemistry, but did not describe their conception of successful bonding in
detail.

I don’t have a lot of concerns usually about the route planning; I
get that done. I’m not super organized. But usually you know what
you’re going to do. The biggest uncertainty is, “What kind of kids
am I going to get? Who’s going to be on the trip? What’s the group
dynamic going to be like?” Usually, you figure that out two or three
days into the trip, after people’s personalities start to surface. That’s
usually the biggest concern for me. I’ve had the benefit of having
a bunch of really great co-counselors, so that’s never been a
concern. (Michael)

In general, students seemed to be describing a group of people who like
each other and work together well:

[I] was really, really excited because, you know, we had done the
week of training before summer. Really great chemistry with my co­
leader. But then that kind of nervous factor about, what kind of
group am I going to get, because that’s a huge question mark.
(Ross)

Students were nervous about the personalities in their group and the types
of group they would lead, but did not express any specific hopes or
concerns about what kind of a group they did hope to lead or not lead.
This likely relates to their desire to provide a positive experience for
students; if the group members were enjoying the community and having
a positive experience, their concerns over bonding seemed to be
satisfied. The co-leader relationship is mentioned, but not as a source of nervousness for this student.

    The following quote illustrates a student’s desire to provide a positive experience similar to what he had experienced. Before his trip, Warren recalled becoming suddenly fearful that he might not be able to “re-create” the experience he felt his leader had created:

    That was the reason I did it, was to share the stuff that happened on my trip. Then all of sudden it was like, wow, what if that was the one time? What if I can’t re-create that? (Warren)

He went on to praise his trip leaders and remember questioning whether he would be able to lead as well as they had led his group. Before the experience, many students did worry about their group bonding.

**Co-Leader Relationship**

Though not as prevalent as other concerns, some students were nervous about navigating the co-leader relationship. “I think the practical things and being able to work with my [co-leader] was something that I was nervous about” (Erik). In the midst of an array of responsibilities, hopes, and fears, the leadership of the experience was shared with another individual:

    I think I was just nervous that my co-leader and I weren’t going to work well together, or that he would know everything and I would know nothing. I was nervous that I wouldn’t be able to lead a trip... effectively in a way [so] that the [participants] felt like they could do it even, because we were leading one of the easier trips, so sometimes you get people that have never hiked before. (Chloe)
Nervousness about the co-leader relationship was present but not prevalent throughout the data. Most students who were nervous about the co-leader dynamic were paired with a more experienced leader whom they respected, admired, and perceived as somewhat intimidating:

My co-leader was amazing and he’s this outdoorsy buff wild man who just last year [went] off and snuck into Cuba. [H]e’s just . . . the coolest. Everyone loves him and he knows all this stuff and God, I’m incompetent.” (Grace)

Navigating the co-leader dynamic was another contributing factor to the widespread feelings of nervousness before these students led their outdoor orientation trips.

**Prepared But Not Ready**

Recalling her excitement about the trip, Lydia shared a realization that came after her leadership experience.

At the same time, it’s kind of really scary, too. You’re prepared, but you don’t think you’re prepared. You are like, “I only had a couple days of training, what if this goes wrong?” You have to go through all the, “Oh, what if my kid gets his finger cut off?” It’s scary but it’s so exciting at the same time. (Lydia)

Despite feelings of nervousness, Lydia knew she had the training to be successful. Maria also articulated this idea: “I didn’t feel ready. I was nervous and felt incompetent but yet knew that I could rely on my past experiences” (Maria). Training eased the apprehension that new student leaders experienced, though it did not eliminate the nervous feelings.
The week coming back to school, a week before the kids were showing up, not having gone through that week of training, I was scared out of my mind thinking, "Okay, this is going to be a one-time thing, so I'm going to screw up and [the program director] is never going to want me back again." But after all the preparation and finally having everything packed and then finally meeting my kids before we went out on the trip, I felt a lot better. (Lucy)

This student indicated that she was concerned about the opinion of the program director as well as her peers. She also indicated confidence in her training, though it did not eradicate all her feelings of nervousness. Students almost unanimously felt nervous and apprehensive before their leadership experience began. "I was terrified. I didn't think I was going to be able to do it" (Evelyn). Before the outdoor orientation experience begins, there is a shared nervousness and anxiety toward the upcoming event. The specific nature of the concern varies from one student to another. They questioned their competence toward the endeavor and feared being exposed as incompetent. They felt prepared by their training but not yet ready for the responsibilities of leading the trip.

**Projecting Competence**

Given the value that student leaders ascribe to the outdoor orientation experience, their understanding of the importance of their role in achieving success, and the pervasive feelings of nervousness before trip, it is not surprising that students reported projecting competence not yet internalized as they embarked upon their first outdoor leadership experience. Students placed in the leadership role were trained, but did
not feel ready for the multifaceted levels of responsibility they faced. Ross laughed as he recalled his participant experience after experiencing the leadership role himself:

It’s hilarious in hindsight because as a [participant] I was like “Our leaders totally know what they’re doing and they’ve probably done this dozens of times before and I’m sure they’re really confident. I had NO idea!” (Ross)

After leading, Ross realized that his participants placed the same level of trust and confidence in him that he had placed in his trip leaders only the year before. However, he also recognized limits to his knowledge, training, and ability of which participants were not aware.

Rather than presenting an image of uncertainty, leaders often perceived the need to pretend to have the situation under control.

People are looking at you and you have to act like you know what you’re doing. There’d be times where me and my co-leader were just not sure what was going on. You act like you know what’s going on and you stay composed, and it’s fine. (Grace)

Grace spoke of the need to remain composed in the face of a high-pressure situation with an unknown outcome. “It’s just picking one of two choices, so [it’s] something past confidence—the ability to grin and fake it a little bit. I think it’s important, the ability to act under pressure.” She describes a skill just “past confidence—the ability to project unfelt competence.

Students recounted instances of projecting an image of
competence even if they did not feel competent or aware of what their next decision might be.

When I was on my own trip, I looked up to my leaders as "Oh, these guys know exactly what they're doing. They're in complete control." Then being in my own situation I tried to make it appear like I was in control—and I think I was for the most part—but there were times when I was unsure . . . a part of leadership is bluffing, to be perfectly honest." (Tim)

Though most students did not use the word "bluffing," this idea is commonly referenced as they describe their experiences.

Actually doing it, you know, okay I am the leader and they do see me as the leader and ... I did feel like the leader that I saw when I was a participant. I did feel like the kids, even though we just met, acknowledged me as their leader. . . . I just got this feeling [that] they may have some confidence in me, that I'll know what to do if something happens. [I felt] this ability to deal with . . . certain situations, but also them seeing that . . . I could deal with things and they could rely on that. (Ross)

Being acknowledged as the leader and recognizing that participants accepted him in the same way he remembers accepting his leaders, began to build confidence in Ross—assurance that he had the ability to "deal with situations" and do a good job in his leadership role.

Though not a focal point within the study, this idea is also present in qualitative data from Fields' (2010) study. In a student response, an outdoor orientation leader stated, "When I didn't feel confident, I just pretended like I was confident" (p. 119). This quote was presented in support of the hypothesis that the outdoor orientation leadership
experience increases leadership self-efficacy, a theme that also emerged in this study and that will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Student leaders are thrust into a role they perceive to be very important, and they do not feel ready to competently manage all the responsibilities that they are given. Therefore, they often feel the need to project confidence or competence in their leadership role. They regularly mention feeling the need to project an image that demonstrates that they know what they are doing, even when they may not feel fully confident in this fact themselves.

**Realizing Personal Competence**

At some point during the leadership experience, students described a shift in their understanding of their personal leadership ability. All their feelings of nervousness disappeared as the trip unfolded. For various reasons, students described a common process of internalizing competence and realizing that they had the ability to lead in ways they did not previously recognize.

**Nervousness Disappears as Trip Happens**

Feelings of nervousness disappeared once the trip began for all students but one. Students cited a number of reasons why their anxiety dissipated, including training, participant excitement, participant initiative, entering the backcountry, feeling empowered by one's co-leader, and
feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Training. Feelings of anxiety and pre-trip nervousness decreased after training for some students. "It's about five weeks of training. I was not nervous at all by the end. By the time I came to lead the trip, I was very confident" (Ross). Membership in a supportive leader community also contributed to helping new leaders feel at ease with the daunting set of upcoming tasks.

Once we get into the process and we do our training, our wilderness first aid, then we spend a good week just spending quality time with the leaders... [T]here's this huge wealth of experience within the current leaders who are here and the alumni who have come back. The anxiety sort of dissipated as you talked to them more, figure out situations that could potentially happen... [T]hen you talk to all of them and they say, "Yeah we've had these minor setbacks here and there, but overall you always make it through." That was helpful, it sort of suppressed the anxiety and then on the actual day it's just pure excitement. (Nate)

Training was important, and quality time with other experienced leaders helped those initial feelings of nervousness dissipate. Training and quality time with other experienced leaders often helped allay concerns about the social and physical "worst-case" situations that many students were concerned about.

Participant Excitement. A major reason often cited for a lack of nervousness was the excitement student leaders recognized in their participants. Once the students arrived and the experience began, the
energy of the participants helped student leaders embrace their new leadership role. "Just meeting them and realizing they were really excited and they were capable and just really into the community already and just pretty stoked on being there took away a lot of my nervousness" (Beth). As participants arrived, this leader was relieved by the excitement of the participants. Others shared this aspect of the experience with her: "I think just their excitement about being there, because everyone was smiling and was so happy. So then I [felt], 'Okay' [and] just jump[ed] right in" (Jill). This excitement fueled the student leaders' confidence to move beyond initial feelings of nervousness and "jump right in" to the leadership role. Rob discussed the dynamic of age as it related to his experience.

I think it changed pretty quickly, I realized. The dynamic between [trip] leaders and participants is interesting, because you're essentially almost their age. In some ways, it's appropriate to just be friends with them, and then in some ways and depending on the situation, if you're making a decision about whether to keep hiking or someone's not feeling well or something like that, then you become this authority figure. It becomes clear really quickly that they look up to you and they think you're this really cool, awesome person, even when you haven't really done anything yet, so that makes it easier. (Rob)

Rob remembered intensive feelings of nervousness dissipating quickly at the outset of the trip. He discussed the nature of the peer leadership role as he reflected upon the balance between being friends with his participants and maintaining an appropriate sense of authority. He
mentioned that the authority was granted immediately, possibly even before it was earned.

**Participant Initiative.** Brandy cited the participants’ willingness to take initiative and accept responsibility for the challenges facing the group.

As soon as you get past the first day, everybody starts to take on leadership themselves. I think that, one, speaks like a credit of what the experience does. In the beginning... my co-leader and I carried an insane amount of weight, and I was getting so tired, and I [thought], "I can't do this [for] five more days." Then, the next day, people, the more extroverted of the group, were out there in the morning after, when I was cooking or something, and they were already starting to divvy up supplies and stuff. They were taking initiative, trying to do things themselves, which not only makes things easier for me so I can focus on the bigger picture things, like making sure we don't get lost and stuff, but also alleviates my concern that they just don't know what they're doing, and they're like little baby ducklings that I saved or herd along to make sure that they're doing okay. I developed, definitely; each day, there was a linear progression of me feeling more and more relaxed that they are competent, and I don't have to worry about a variety of things. I just worry about the really freaky accidents happening. (Brandy)

As members of the group accepted responsibility, it allowed this student leader to focus on the relational needs of the group. This also alleviated this leader’s concern that the students were helpless individuals. Despite feeling more comfortable in her leadership role, this student remained concerned about the possibility of dealing with a serious accident.

**Entering the Backcountry.** Most students remembered their nervousness disappearing as soon as they began backcountry travel.
"I've got to tell you, the minute we were in the woods, it just all melted away" (Warren). This student reiterated the drastic difference in his emotive state between the anxiety-filled hours leading up to the trip and the almost-instantaneous shift once hiking began. Others described similar experiences. "Once you actually get on the trail, everyone's fine, you're hiking, you set up camp and that's fun. Every step of the way it gets easier and easier" (Evelyn). Though not the immediate transformation described by Warren, nervous feelings quickly subside as the group begins backpacking. The following quote describes the feelings of nervousness more fully. "The first day, I was still really nervous—I mean, I wasn't that nervous but I was worried that they weren't going to work together as a group. Then we got on the bus on the first day and we actually started hiking, and it was so good" (Aubrey). The student leader denies feeling nervous and classifies her emotions as more of a worry that her group would not bond. This distinction likely helps frame the perspective of others within the nervousness theme as well.

Student leaders were not always feeling physically nervous, but were at the very least concerned about the tasks at hand. "I think the first few days are the most stressful just because there's a lot that has to be done and it has to be done in a specific order. But once you get out on trail, we have the freedom to run things as we want. So I felt a lot more comfortable once we got out on trail" (Jackson).
I wouldn’t say I was nervous during the trip, really. There were points where I was very tired and maybe stressed . . . because I have to deal with different things, but I wasn’t ... maybe it’s more accurate saying I was very anxious before the trip and that kind of anxiety went away once I was out in the woods. (Tim)

Empowered by the Co-Leader. Lucy described her feelings of nervousness lingering into the first day of the trip. She recalled relying heavily on her more experienced co-leader and pointed to a moment when he challenged her to take over the navigation responsibilities for the next day.

Definitely, the first day and a half that we were out in the woods, I was pretty much directing everything towards my co-leader Jacob because everything was just going on and I’d [say], "I don’t know. I don’t know. Ask him." I didn’t realize that most of the time, a lot of the leaders make up stuff. (laughing) If you ask, “Should I be wearing my gloves right now?” [They say,] “No, it’s after five p.m. that you wear your gloves.” And you improvise and you roll with it.

It was out of my comfort zone and everything, so it was just a matter of getting on track. By the middle of the second day, I felt a lot more at ease because I had established that things were to be directed to Jacob because people knew that he had led about four other times and this was my first time and some of my kids were older than I was.

By the end of the first day, I was upset. The second day, because I had established that standard, I felt inadequate but Jacob, being a great co-leader, we always kept in constant communication. So he said, “You know what? You take the map tomorrow. You’re going to navigate." I always told him that’s one of my worst [skills]. I can’t read maps to save my life. He [said] “I know you can do this. You’ve had training. You’re fine.”

By the second night, people were coming at me [to ask], “Should we go get pots of water now?” and everything and I felt a lot more at ease. I felt a lot more confident. By the third day, I felt a lot more confident. (Lucy)
Sense of Achievement. Some students recalled a specific turning point during the experience when they felt a sense of achievement that caused the feelings of nervousness to vanish. For some, this event was as small as being asked a simple question that they were able to answer. For others, the sense of accomplishment came in the form of a turning point in the group dynamic. Recognition of one's leadership ability from others was important. The group's response to their decisions and guidance is what gave these student leaders a sense of legitimacy.

I do think ... maybe I just got lucky. I had a great trip. Really different kids, but they all got along really well. Once you start to develop a rapport, then a lot of those fears quickly dissipate. There was one night on our trip ... I think I was only on a four-day trip, yeah, so it was a little bit shorter. I think it was the second night, when one of my [participants] got really homesick. You could tell that she hadn't been feeling awesome before that, so it was really early, I think just after dinner maybe, and she told us that she just wanted to go lie down and go to sleep. She said she had a headache, she said she wasn't feeling that well, and so obviously we told her that she could do whatever she wanted. If she wanted to lie down, that was fine, but I was a little bit nervous because she was taking herself out of the group. The second night was going to be really important because we do these things called Hometowns, where everybody gets a long time, like 30 to 40 minutes, just to talk about their life and talk about their ... I'm sure the other interviews talked about Hometowns ... and really just tell whatever story they want to tell, and then everybody else asks questions. I really didn't want her to miss out on that, and so she went and laid down for a few minutes and then got up and came over to the group and was just like, "You know what, can I just explain something," and then she started crying and then she was just explaining. "I haven't cried at all yet, but I knew that it was going to come. It hadn't hit me yet that I was leaving home."

I think she was a little bit embarrassed, but also was just going to explain it to the group and not be shy about it. That was definitely a
Rob described a specific moment when the pressure lifted and the trip became "what I imagined it was supposed to be." He described ongoing feelings of nervousness leading up to a turning point in the trip experience. He was concerned about one participant who was feeling homesick and possibly at risk of ostracizing herself from the group. Her willingness to trust the group enough to talk about her emotions surrounding the college transition communicated trust and value to her group. At that point, "everything just clicked" and other students became more willing to be vulnerable as well. The participant's willingness to take the social risk of sharing her feelings coupled with the group's acceptance of that individual created a unifying experience for the group. Not all trips have a specific turning point like this, but most student leaders describe a point at which they realized their nervous feelings were gone.

The reasons that students' nervousness dissipates vary, but almost all reported that those feelings ending immediately or very soon after the trip began. Erik reported becoming more nervous as the trip began, but attributed these feelings to the fact that his co-leader unexpectedly dropped out just before the trip started to be at home for a relative who
had become suddenly ill. The transition to a new co-leader created a
difficult dynamic for that individual. However, during most trip leadership
experiences, students lost their feelings of nervousness during the trip. As
students entered the backcountry they seemed to grow into the
leadership role, leaving behind the pre-trip anxiety and moving toward
increased comfort in the leadership responsibilities.

**Internalizing Competence**

As student leaders felt less nervous, they also reported feeling more
confident in their ability to fulfill their role. Students described the process
of learning about their unique strengths and weaknesses within the trip
context.

As we got into the swing of things, I kind of figured out the whole
[leader] dynamic and what I was good at and what I could
specifically offer. [A]s the trip kind of got going and it was less of
the logistical craziness... you were just out in the wilderness and
camping and canoeing and spending time with each other. I
realized, "Oh, this is something that I love. I can do this." That really
helped, and I wasn't nervous anymore. (Amanda)

As the trip progressed, students experienced competence in the areas
they were previously nervous to attempt. Tim described the process of
becoming more comfortable in a leadership role.

I guess part of it is just knowing that you're completely capable of
doing it and just kind of getting used to the idea that you're a
leader and... you can do a good job with it. You sort of become
more comfortable with it." (Tim)
It was definitively hard at times, but it was such a solidly good trip. Not every moment was super fun but the kids got along really well and one said they’d do evaluations a couple weeks after they get back and they’re all about evaluations. They’re just like, “Our leader was the best, they were so capable, they always knew what to do.” All of these super glowing things, every single one of them. That was really rewarding, “Whoa, I can do that. That’s cool.” It was so sweet. I did have this feeling of nervousness and I talked about going in and couldn’t reason why I was chosen to lead a [difficult hiking] trip and just didn’t... I would not have chosen myself to lead a [difficult hiking] trip. I didn’t think I was capable of it and I sort of just had to... I was, “Okay, I’m going to act like I’m capable of it” and yes, that’s doing something that you didn’t think you could do and having people see this potential in you that you haven’t seen yourself. (Grace)

For Grace and others, the realization that they were capable of leading a group of their peers and wielding the multifaceted responsibility demanded in this role was significant. Positive support and feedback from peers acted as a vehicle for the realization of this success. Post-trip evaluations were important, and the fact that her peers accepted and praised her after experiencing her leadership changed her understanding of her own potential. She then saw herself as a capable, competent leader who is comfortable in that role.

Other students made the connection between their newly discovered leadership competence and situations beyond the outdoor orientation leadership context.

I remember the feeling and know the feeling—and that’s kind of stuck with me—of just... knowing... I can be this leader that other people recognize and I can successfully lead a group in the
Adirondacks and I'll know what to do in a lot of different situations.
(Ross)

Students also described the process of realizing success after their trip experience.

Being on my own and being one of two people who are solely responsible for these kids, and getting them through it all safe, fine—they're all friends now; they're very close. They had a good time as far as I can tell. They adjusted to college nicely as far as I can tell. That was nice. It was like, 'Hey, I did it!' Even though I had doubts at some points, or I was worried about some things, I actually accomplished it and it wasn't that hard. You know, I thought it was going to be hard but it really wasn't. (Scott)

Students described a process of moving from feeling overwhelmed and incompetent to capable and proud of their accomplishments and abilities. What initially seemed very difficult was reframed in light of what is understood to be a "successful" trip experience. For many students, competence projected at the beginning of their leadership experience was internalized before the trip ends. Students became "comfortable" in the leadership role (Grace), and realized it was not as hard as they had once believed (Scott). By the end of the trip leadership experience, students described the achievement of a sense of personal competence that had previously been absent.
CHAPTER VI

PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF LEADING AN OUTDOOR ORIENTATION TRIP

After the trip, outdoor orientation program leaders described the significance of their leadership role as a positive shift in their confidence and interpersonal ability. Student leaders within faith-based programs reported experiencing spiritual growth and witnessing spiritual growth in their participants. Spiritual growth was not mentioned within non-faith-based programs.

Increased Confidence

When asked what change they attributed to their outdoor orientation leadership experience, students said "increased confidence" more than any other reason; it was mentioned by all students interviewed in this study. "It was just a general confidence booster to have a group of six kids and lead them through the Adirondacks for a few days" (Ross). Individual definitions of the confidence construct varied, and perceptions about why confidence increased were nuanced. Three themes emerged as students described their conceptual understanding of confidence: the transfer of achieved competence, learning to have a voice, and leadership self-efficacy. These themes collectively illustrate what students
meant as they expressed their belief that their confidence had increased as a result of leading an outdoor orientation program trip.

Transfer of Achieved Competence

The previous chapter illustrated the process of moving from nervousness about incompetence through a projection of unfelt competence to arrive at an internalized belief in personal competence. Students believed this confidence transferred to contexts beyond their outdoor orientation leadership role. When discussing the change they felt they had undergone after their leadership experience, many students described a belief in their ability to successfully face adversity in future situations. "I think it lends itself to a certain self-confidence in other situations. It seems like this is kind of a real experience as opposed to a lot of other things which are kind of fake and . . . you can handle real experiences" (Matt). After follow-up questions, Matt clarified his definition of 'real experiences.' Essentially, he did not believe he had experienced similar levels of autonomy and responsibility before or since his outdoor orientation leadership experience. There was an authenticity to the trip leadership role.

Students perceived the experience of taking on responsibility for the trip to foster a sense of confidence in different contexts. One student attributed her higher level of perceived confidence to the process of teaching throughout the trip. "I think the trip definitely made me realize
that I knew more than I thought I knew and so it helped me gain more confidence" (Beth). As this student experienced the leadership role and realized success within that role, she was surprised by her personal knowledge. A sophomore student who described coming into the outdoor orientation leadership experience after a difficult freshman year shared a similar realization.

The hugest thing for me was that it brought out a lot of self-confidence. I really struggled in certain areas my freshman year and I really wasn’t feeling confident by the end of the year. Being able to be on trip and do really hard things and prove to myself, I can actually do this. I can handle these intense situations and do it really well. That was really important, I got a lot of confidence in me that’s definitely going to carry over. (Amanda)

Achieving a perceived success within the outdoor orientation leadership role promoted a general confidence toward future challenges. Amanda left the experience feeling capable of fulfilling the requirements of this specific role and described a belief that this success would increase her understanding of her potential in future situations.

I think the thing that’s been the most important is again just that confidence that I’ve come back with and the feeling that yeah, I can do hard things. I can face what is coming. Just that I have what it takes. I think this summer was really good in teaching me those things. (Amanda)

This student and many others believed in the importance of the confidence they gained from the experience. Internalized competence extended well beyond confidence in one’s ability to effectively lead an outdoor orientation trip. Students described a deepened belief in
themselves as someone who is capable, who "can do hard things," and who has "what it takes." (Amanda)

I gained a lot of confidence from doing it. It's interesting. Even if you don't really do anything as a leader—just being in that kind of position I think gives you a lot of confidence—whether it's warranted or not. I'm under the belief that confidence is one of the most important things in life. I think it can get you through most situations. (Scott)

Scott believed that the confidence gained may not accurately reflect competence, but argues for the importance of the belief because of the pragmatic value of feeling confident in one's ability because "it can get you through most situations" (Scott). As students described an increase in confidence that they attributed to their leadership experience, many viewed this construct as an extension of the "internalizing competence" theme described near the end of Chapter 5. Many students believed that the process of internalizing competence caused them to raise their expectations of personal competence in future situations.

**Learning to Have a Voice**

Confidence was also described as the process of learning to have a voice. Students described their leadership experience as a catalyst for the realization of personal value. "I define confidence as more of an assurance of value, or I guess a belief that you have value and what you do has value. Just that you have abilities that are worthwhile" (Lydia).

The outdoor orientation leadership role provided students who
participated in this study with a realization that others can accept their thoughts and ideas as valuable.

I really wrestled with my confidence of leadership over the past couple of years, just believing that people really want to be led by what I have to say and who I am as a leader and what my experiences are. Kind of always seeking input from the group but not having a lot of boldness as a natural leader. I think this summer really taught me [that] people are interested in learning from me and what I have to offer. I think that's given me a lot of voice as a peer leader [and] even just in the relationships with my friends, being able to have more confidence and saying, "Hey, yeah this is what I think." People do, they want to hear what I have to say. I didn't [necessarily] believe that about myself before. (Amanda)

Amanda described a struggle with confidence characterized by listening to ideas from others without a willingness to present her own ideas. As she experienced acceptance in a leadership role, she began to believe in the value of her perspective. Authority within the trip leadership role gave her "a lot of voice as a peer leader" and changed her level of confidence toward presenting her perspective to participants and in other relationships beyond the trip leadership role. "In the past, I would always be so willing to listen to people but not really have much to say, but [now] if you ask me what I think, I feel like what I have to say is solid" (Amanda). Student leaders described the process of learning to value their own ideas and opinions. After the trip leadership experience, students' belief in the value of personal perspective resulted in an increased willingness to share their ideas with friends, classmates, and professors once they had returned to campus.
One student recounted the significance of learning to be vulnerable and trust another individual. The trip leadership process provided a context to explore appropriate boundaries for self-disclosure.

I've learned from [program] staff to [my co-leader] how being open about what's going on inside creates a very safe place if you do it right. You can't just spill your guts to anyone. That's another thing. With working with [my co-leader], I can't just spill everything. She doesn't need to hear everything, but being vulnerable and willing to trust yourself with someone . . . that has carried into my relationships. I'm just learning: how do I speak? How do I have a voice? (Amy)

For Amy, finding a voice meant becoming more willing to share aspects of herself in an appropriate way. She went on to share the ways in which this changed her classroom behavior the next semester.

In a classroom, I would ordinarily just kind of stay to myself and not really say anything to anyone else or answer questions the professor asks. It would not really go beyond that, especially not after class. I think realizing that—having to do that on the trip, having to say, "How can I get everyone to mesh or how can I help with that?" Realizing that is really helpful for a lot of people, especially people like me who were tending not to do that. Now I can see where I'm more open to, okay let me talk to this person outside of class ... I think that's something that has been changing . . . I'm more open and less skeptical of people's intentions, when they are trying to get a group together and just being a part of that. Being open to those efforts instead of blocking it off. (Amy)

After experiencing the facilitator role and dealing with the difficulty of trying to manage the development of a small group of incoming students, some students returned to the classroom context more open to speaking up and participating. Amy described a change that involved not only personal confidence in her ability to add value to classroom
conversations, but also a motivational shift toward being more open to efforts from authority figures who are “trying to get a group together” (Amy). Other students similarly claimed that they had come away from the outdoor orientation leadership experience with an increased willingness to speak up and take social risks in the classroom.

I'm definitely a person who doesn't talk as much in groups, especially in situations where I'm just out of my comfort zone, not really knowing people as well. I feel like I've been able to speak up more and I guess just take risks relationally, putting myself out there more. (Brian)

The outdoor orientation leadership role affected what this student calls “putting myself out there more.” Brian recognized in himself an increased willingness to speak up in groups and advocate for his own thoughts and opinions. Many students connected this outcome to their conception of confidence. “Just having that confidence, I've seen myself speak out more” (Evelyn). After their leadership experience, students said they were more likely express opinions and exercise their “voice” in social groups. For most students, this change is described as a continuum, and not a definitive change.

I still am to some extent that kid that is not going to raise his hand, just not volunteer. Probably when he should either say, “That doesn’t make sense” or “I know the answer” or “I disagree.” But now I am much more likely to be that kid. Freshman and sophomore year I mostly just sat silent in my class. I would talk when I felt I had something interesting enough to say, or something to add to the conversation. But now, even if I don't have something to add to the conversation I'll still raise my hand and say... something (laughs). Or I'm more likely to say, “I don't agree with
you." It's good, because I'm more likely to stand up for myself, basically. (Scott)

Social confidence directly shaped this student's classroom interaction.

Before the leadership experience, he describes his classroom involvement as limited; he indicated that the confidence gained from leading an outdoor orientation program trip transferred into the classroom context to give him the ability to present his opinion, disagree with others, and "stand up for myself." In the interview, Scott went on to describe other life contexts impacted by this increased social confidence.

In social situations, it's a lot easier to talk to people I don't know and introduce myself and say, "Hey, what's up." I think I would be more confident going into an interview. I think I'm more confident talking to people. I'm not as focused on every little thing I say. I have enough confidence that in the end, I think I'm going to come off as who I want to come off as. (Scott)

Classroom involvement, general social interactions, and potential future job interviews are a few examples of social arenas in which Scott feels more capable of presenting himself accurately. Nate also indicated some of the reasons he felt more confident in social situations.

I would say that just seeing these interactions, how they can happen, made me less reserved to sort of put myself out there in situations, maybe in school, to meeting new people or talking to people in, say, a lab class or any one of my classes or opening myself up to discussion. I think seeing it work so well out there and seeing how people can accept what you're saying, who you are, in a matter of days if you sort of overcome these problems together; it opened my eyes to that. I've been a little bit more outgoing, I'd say, after seeing that work. (Nate)
The process of observing the social dynamics of the outdoor orientation trip provided a new understanding of social situations that empowered this student to be more outgoing. Jessica and Scott specifically mentioned their increased willingness post-trip to approach professors.

In a classroom, I would ordinarily just kind of stay to myself and not really say anything to anyone else or answer questions the professor asks. It would rarely go beyond that, especially not after class. I think realizing that having to do that, having to say [on the trip], “How can I get everyone to mesh or how can I help with that?” is really helpful for a lot of people, especially people like me who were tending not to do that. Now, I can see where I’m more open, okay let me talk to this person outside of class or let me actually share more. . . . I think that’s something that has been changing . . . I’m more open and less skeptical of people’s intentions, when they are trying to get a group together and just being a part of that. Being open to those efforts instead of blocking it off. (Jessica)

Being given the responsibility for the formation of a group resulted in this student being more open to group formation efforts from her professors.

She was more willing to engage with classroom learning outside of structured class time. Scott echoed this sentiment.

I’m much more willing to just do things. I’m much more willing to just go up to a professor and say, “Hey, I don’t understand this. I need help with this.” Or I’m much more willing to raise my hand in class and say, “I don’t get it,” rather than sitting there and saying it to myself, but not putting myself out there. (Scott)

The language of “putting myself out there,” as used by these students, involves willing acceptance of a social risk involved in sharing one’s opinions or ideas.
Not all students who lead outdoor orientation program trips begin the experience as an individual who tends to “ordinarily just kind of stay to myself” (Jessica). Interestingly, this learning seemed specialized to the needs of the individual. Some who said they tended to be more talkative in group contexts before the experience became less talkative in class afterward, providing opportunities for others to speak while they listen.

I think now I’m more apt to listen as opposed to putting in my two cents. For example, I saw one of my [participants] last night and we got together and hung out. She’s been really struggling with a lot of stuff since being at [college], so it’s really taught me to shut up and listen as opposed [to saying], “Here’s my pledge. Here’s how to go. Here’s what to do now.” (Maria)

For Maria, who described herself as “very outgoing,” the trip leadership experience taught her to “shut up and listen.” For some students, learning to have a voice also meant learning when not to speak for the sake of listening. Other students came to understand their perspective as valuable and became more open to sharing their ideas and opinions in close personal relationships, social groups, classroom contexts, and professor interactions.

**Leadership Self-Efficacy**

Leadership self-efficacy is the third conceptual meaning that students espoused when speaking of confidence gained from their trip leadership experience. Students described feeling more confident in their
ability to lead after fulfilling their responsibilities as a leader within the outdoor orientation program.

- I think at the end of it I felt [as if] I could trust myself more in leading. That was something that I really felt. (Jessica)
- I feel it’s definitely, in general, improved my leadership. I feel like I’m more capable and willing to take control of situations. (Tim)
- It definitely changed me as person in that I know that I can be a leader. (Aubrey)

Jessica indicates an increased sense of trust in herself in a leadership role. For Tim, the experience improved his leadership ability and caused him to feel able to exercise leadership in different contexts. Aubrey indicated a change in personal ability. All these comments indicate a shift in identity.

After their role in leading an outdoor orientation program trip, students saw themselves differently—as someone who was capable of leading others successfully. “Maybe the next time I take up a different leadership role I will feel more … confident in myself as a leader” (Ross).

The difference described by Ross is not necessarily a difference in ability but rather in his understanding of his personal identity. Because of an experience he saw as a success, he believed he may feel more confident in his leadership ability in new contexts.

Jackson was a few years older than other students in the study and had served in the military between high school and college. His interview was one of the last conducted for this study. Considering his previous
experience, the value he ascribed to the outdoor orientation program leadership role is notable. In the following quote, he describes changes in himself that he attributes to his outdoor leadership experience.

I think I felt much more confident in the leadership role ... Now that I've come back [to] school I feel more comfortable in other situations as a leader because I've grown so comfortable with it elsewhere ... I can start making connections [with] things outside [trip]. For example, in one of my classes we're doing a debate ... I'm the group leader for that and I don't think I would be nearly as comfortable with that role had I not been a [trip leader] this summer. I'm a lot more goal-oriented and I can make plans and plan out steps where I want to be at certain times. (Jackson)

For Jackson, extensive military training did not provide the level of comfort in a leadership role that he gained from his outdoor orientation leadership role. Because of the outdoor orientation leadership experience, this student believed he was more goal-oriented and more comfortable in leadership positions on campus. His example of taking leadership in a large public debate described a specific context in which he had benefitted from the confidence gained through the outdoor orientation leadership experience.

Planning for my trips this summer helped me figure out what I need to plan for other things. What are essential things? Getting people's contact information and making sure everyone is on the same page, keep[ing] lines of communication open and setting goals when we need to have certain checkpoints set to make sure that we achieve those goals. (Jackson)

Planning for the trip helped Jackson learn how to plan for other life events. Establishing and communicating plans to others, collaboratively setting goals, and holding group members accountable to goals were a few
aspects of the experience that increased Jackson's confidence in his
ability to lead.

When asked about prior leadership experiences and lessons
learned therein, Jackson was the only individual to mention gains in
confidence from leadership roles prior to the outdoor orientation program
leadership experience. When discussing his leadership experience in the
military, he said he had gained "personal confidence, and through
continuous failure of things, you learn how to operate and how to make
decisions wisely." When Jackson also mentioned gains in confidence
from the outdoor orientation program leadership experience, I asked him
the following question.

Interviewer: Thinking about the confidence that you gained from your
experiences in the Coast Guard, how is that confidence
similar to or different from the confidence that you gained
from your [leadership] experience?

Jackson: I think it's different mostly because of the context. With that
it's much more aggressive. The goal is to assault something
and take something down whereas... it's destruction in a
sense. But, in [outdoor orientation] it's construction. So I think
that was one of the big differences. . . . [T]here are a lot of
similarities between that and constructing things in terms of
organization and communication. You have to
communicate with everyone; I think in any sort of team effort
making sure everyone is on the same page and just having
that common goal [is essential]. I think that's always going to
be an essential component of any team. Anytime you're
working with someone else in a relationship role.

The italicized "construction" indicates Jackson's tonal emphasis. The
years he spent in the military gave him confidence in leadership situations
requiring destruction. Jackson articulated a striking difference between the confidence gained in the military and in outdoor orientation. The latter involves building up incoming students and working to construct a positive community experience that assists students in their transition to college. Jackson describes similarities between the requirements for success in both contexts: organization, effective communication, and a common goal.

**Reasons Confidence Increased**

No single element of the outdoor orientation leadership role causes the students to perceive themselves as more confident individuals. Rather, students described many elements throughout the process of the leadership experience that culminated in a new way of understanding their potential, as characterized by the following quote.

> You go into this [trip] leader situation and you’re so nervous, and you’re worried about how they’re going to perceive you, and you realize that’s not compatible with the way they’re actually perceiving you. They’re putting complete trust and confidence in you, so you see this disparity of the way you’re feeling and the way you realize, because of what you know, how they’re feeling, and suddenly you [think], “Oh, my nervousness, my fears are unfounded. That’s silly.” Then you come back to life—that’s what it does feel like when you come back from these trips—and you walk into any situation, and...the experience of leading a trip gave me the confidence to realize that there can be this disparity in terms of how I think I’m being perceived and how I’m actually being perceived. There’s no reason to overthink how I’m being perceived... and I might as well just let it go and be totally down with that and what I’m bringing to the table. (Jon)

Jon’s quote contains many themes described in Chapter 5: nervousness
before the trip, projecting confidence, realizing personal competence, responsibility. Jon shows how those themes fostered his sense of confidence when “you come back to life and you walk into any situation” with a new sense of confidence in “what I’m bringing to the table” (Jon).

The process of doubting one’s ability and overcoming the perceived challenges of the trip leadership role provided this student with a personal confidence that shaped his perspective on future social situations that induce feelings of insecurity. Prior success in the outdoor orientation leadership role allowed this student to escape fears about the perceptions of others feelings in future social contexts.

It was the intensity and responsibility . . . but yet I came out okay. I think it was the fact that I gained confidence because of my relative success, I think. The fact that it was a challenge that I overcame. (Tim)

This quote captures the essential reason many students felt more confident after their trip leadership experience. The interaction between “intensity and responsibility” and “success” created feelings of readiness for future challenges. Students felt more capable of handling adversity in social situations and potential future leadership roles.

**Increased Interpersonal Ability**

Many of the changes that student leaders attributed to their outdoor orientation leadership experience involved aspects of increased interpersonal ability. First, as students managed the co-leader relationship, they articulated ways in which it helped them learn to work
with another person effectively. Second, the process of acting as a facilitator for a small community increased their social awareness in future social groups and fostered an attitude of acceptance toward others.

**Learned to Work with Another Person Effectively**

After working with a co-leader during the outdoor orientation leadership experience, students believed they had gained an ability to work with others more effectively.

You can get away from the [participants], but your co-leader is with you for every decision made, every mess up—they see everything because they know how trips are supposed to be done. And also ... the whole comparing each other’s leadership skills and strengths and weaknesses and having such a close relationship with them—whether you want it or not (laughter). Just talking through things, you learn a lot about communication skills. You learn a lot about relational things. You learn a lot about compromise. (Anna)

As the themes of nervousness and responsibility presented in Chapters 4 and 5 suggest, students feel quite reliant upon their co-leader. This student describes the close nature of the working relationship between a student and his or her fellow co-leader—there is a transparency regarding mistakes that participants may not notice, and their leadership skills will differ. Communicating clearly and practicing a willingness to compromise is important to working well together. This relationship is not always easy or straightforward, as Anna hints by her humorous reference to the inevitable closeness of the relationship that developed. Students pointed to three specific aspects of the leadership experience that improved their ability to
work with others in future contexts: articulating personal needs and desires, resolving conflict, and collaborating toward common goals.

**Articulating Personal Needs and Desires.** Students believed that the trip leadership role increased their ability to clearly communicate their personal needs. Amy recalled a critical moment when she and her co-leader realized they did not feel supported by each other.

I [said], “I need you to support me. And this is how you can support me... What do you need? Because I don't know what you need and you don't know what I need. So therefore I'm going to tell you all these things—boom. Please do them.” (Amy)

The trip leadership experience provided an opportunity to practice communicating personal needs and seeking to understand the needs of others. Amy said that this particular conversation was meaningful because of the way it changed the rest of that trip, but also because of the ways in which it shaped her understanding of communicating her needs in future relationships.

**Resolving Conflict.** Students made personal gains in conflict resolution. “I think it has helped my communication skills. Especially with conflict” (Anna). When asked to elaborate on what she meant by “conflict,” Anna described the following general scenario:

You have one vision for the group, and another person has a different vision. So talking that through—what you see and why you think that way and then hearing their side and trying to make both of them work in a way both of you agree with so you can both support it fully. (Anna)
The co-leader relationship often leads to conflict; these experiences taught some students the value of addressing conflict early.

Well this past summer, I worked very closely with another person.... I think because of my [trip leadership] experience and having that co-leader, I was able to better communicate things and address things—like any kind of hurt or issue—a lot earlier and it wouldn't build up. So I was able to make a much smoother experience.... Not like my co-leader and I ever thought, but I think we held some things in a little too long, and learn[ed] how much better it is to address things earlier. (Sophia)

Sophia described learning “to address [conflict] earlier” as a result of her co-leader relationship. She believed that this realization would help her resolve conflict sooner in future situations. As she discussed the importance of addressing conflict, she reflected upon the importance of positive feedback as well.

The other thing for me is that you’re kind of forced, at least through the confrontation, it’s like you either deal with it or it’s going to be there forever ... so that was a big thing. Then, also, with the appreciation—if I don’t tell this person that what they’re doing is great, they’re not going to continue. So there’s both ends of that. (Sophia)

Sophia believes the wilderness environment “forces” confrontation. Though even the longest outdoor orientation trips only last a few weeks, this seems like “forever” to students immersed in the experience, and they feel the need to resolve conflict that could be avoided in a normal campus environment. Jon offered insight he had gained from his trip leadership experience. He believes that co-leader conflict is inevitable on
I was so fortunate to have a co-leader that was absolutely wonderful. We’re really good friends. We were friends before, but we’ve become very good friends since being co-leaders. But things come up where you’re not quite—no matter—in any relationship with anyone, you’re never perfectly compatible, because every human being is such a distinct individual...But being put into a situation where you must reconcile those differences, and quickly, because outside of a trip, outside of being in the woods, it was kind of like when people say you really learn so much about someone when you travel with them, because you two are isolated in the whole place... and you know you’re going to spend a lot of time together, you must figure it out. I think that a trip is a more intense version of that, because on top of that, you’re responsible for the whole well-being of these other freshmen. . . . I think [because of] my ability to really be accepting of these differences and make compromises and find ways to find middle ground... [that] I’ve definitely benefitted. And I think that’s the obvious part... And it’s not even something that requires compromise, it just requires that I be like, “Okay, sure. You’re that way, and I’m this way,” and these things can both exist simultaneously, and understanding that not every conflict has to be a conflict. A conflict of interest doesn’t have to be resolved, you know? Conflicts of interest can exist and... you can still move forward, and each side can bring a different element to the trip... I think that’s really cool. [O]bviously some things do need to be resolved if they’re central enough to what’s going on to be in agreement about what’s happening. (Jon)

Jon described the involved nature of the co-leader relationship, clarifying the root cause of co-leader conflicts: human individuality. Conflicts that are not central to the mission of the experience may exist simultaneously and may not need to be addressed, but conflict does need to be resolved if it is “central enough to what’s going on.” Most student leaders indicated that conflict resolution between them and their co-leader had

the trip, but notes that conflict resolution is a nuanced need that can be overemphasized to the detriment of a positive trip experience.
been a part of the experience; many referenced lessons about general conflict resolution that they hoped to apply to future relationship contexts.

**Collaborating Toward Common Goals.** Students described the process of working closely with their co-leader as a collaborative endeavor.

It was interesting working with one other person very closely, and the compromises you have to make... I don’t have any siblings, so I haven’t grown up with someone my own age (besides my friends) ... My co-leader, while of course we’re friends, we also have a dual responsibility, which is to help these kids get oriented to college and make sure they’re safe. So there are times where maybe she thought we ought to do this, and I thought we ought to do that, and we came to some sort of agreement where I think it worked out for the best. (Scott)

Shared purpose provides the foundation for a working relationship between co-leaders that often extends into a friendship. Within the relationship, there is a consistent flux of decisions and compromises as the pair attempts to pursue the multifaceted aspects of responsibility outlined in Chapter 4.

There’s a little bit of companionship there too, but then also being people that have to be constantly communicating with each other and constantly checking in with each other, making decisions together, supporting each other. I think you have to be very intentional about it. I ended up having a really good relationship with all my [co-leaders] and realizing that was something that I really worked at and I think I did very successfully. I think I did a good job supporting that. I think I did a good job communicating with them. That build my confidence a lot too, to say, “Oh, here’s another typical aspect that I know I can do really well.” (Amanda)
Again, the working relationship overlapping with friendship emerges. Amanda outlined the various ways in which collaboration occurs within the leadership dyad: checking in, making decisions together, and supporting each other. She emphasized the constant nature of this interaction and stated that the result of feeling like she managed the co-leader relationship well also increased her confidence. Students generally valued their co-leader dynamic.

I felt weirdly like I learned a lot in my relationship with my co-leader. . . . [We] were really different people [but] we really clicked, and we really got along. We really had a vibe, and I felt like I had a little glimpse of what marriage and raising kids is like, because neither of us would want to do something; I guess it was the equivalent of, "You make the baby stop crying," or stuff like that. It's been pouring rain, and the tarp is pulling, and [I say], "I fixed it 10 minutes ago," and, "It's about to make our [participants] wet." You have to just know and rely on each other. You have to know what they can do and what you can do. You just have to know each other, totally. That's a great thing. I think that's very special to know someone like that. I guess that's what appeals to me about leading again. (Brandy)

The parenthood analogy is as amusing as it is helpful in understanding the bonds that develop between co-leaders as they undertake an important, challenging task together. Students believed that they learned meaningful lessons from the close relationships they formed as they partnered with a fellow student with the goal of positively impacting a group of (typically) younger incoming students.

Students also indicated that difficulty in the relationship did not necessarily produce negative learning outcomes. A student who had
struggled to relate to her co-leader on the trip described how the
difficulty of working with that individual had increased her confidence in
her ability to work well with others.

Overcoming all those obstacles just gave me a lot of confidence in
what I can overcome... to know that I could work with someone
who I found difficult to work with, that I can make it through that... now I feel like I can make it work with anybody, to some extent." (Jill)

After their leadership experience, students believe they have a greater
ability to work well with others in future partnership opportunities.

**Social Facilitator**

Students reported having increased awareness of social situations
and social needs. Many noticed that they had become more aware of
individuals being socially excluded. "I think I’ve always been a very
friendly person but I might not have always consciously been aware of
how excluded people can feel in certain situations" (Shane). Other
students discussed why trip impacted this social awareness.

I really like how, as a leader, it’s your job to be nice and deal with
things. even if you don’t necessarily like someone, or see you’re
going to be friends with them. I think that’s really important to carry.
I think I’ve carried that through, afterwards, keeping in mind that,
maybe, this person you think is super annoying, but it’s probably
worth it to help them out in the long run. (Chris)

This student described the social facilitation as his "job." He stated that
being nice to people he might not relationally gravitate toward is
desirable, and that his trip leadership role has helped him become more
open and accepting of others. He went on to discuss taking the
leadership mentality from the trip back into other areas of the campus. "I think that it helps me interact with people on a daily basis. Maybe be less selfish, even the way that I am day-to-day" (Chris). This student was not from a faith-based program, but a similar concept of unconditional love as a lived theological construct did arise from students who led in the faith-based programs.

It was the first time I was really forced into an environment where I had to get along with people that I hadn't chosen myself. Growing up, you're always able to pick your friends. Now here you are in this group with seven other [participants] and two leaders, and you didn't pick any of them. You've just got to get to know everyone. I had to change from being selective with my friends to being more gracious and embracing of all sorts of people, especially folks whose personalities would maybe rub me the wrong way, or freak me out a little bit. I had to calm down and be okay with that. I had to learn to interact with people more openly. I was a pretty guarded person. I still am, I think, to a certain degree, but definitely much more so coming out of high school. [The program] really broke that down for me, as did subsequent summers at [the program]. It made me more tolerant of both physical pain, and people. I would say the biggest impact that [this program] has had on me, if you could disentangle it from other things, would probably be my perspective on community; what you have to do with people when you're forced into a tight space with them, or when this is kind of the group you've got. (Michael)

Being placed into a diverse group who had not formed on the basis of commonalities or personality types increased Michael's tolerance for others. He went on to express his belief that caring for others, regardless of differences, was his responsibility. "You have to learn to love them, in their individual ways and on their terms." After being questioned about the nature of the requirement to love others, Michael responded:
I think that's what we're called to do. Christ came—one thing I do like about [the outdoor program] is the parallel it has with Christ's ministry. His ministry was incarnational. I feel like that's sort of the similar embodied ministry that [the program] tries to do. You choose a counselor or a person, you insert them into a temporary community. You assemble your group. Jesus got his 12, and they were all different. They didn't choose each other. Jesus just chose them. At [this program], you get your [participants] on a spread sheet. At the start, you're like, "I don't know who any of these people are, and they don't know, either." You pull them together. For that amount of time, this is your community. You're all in with this group. (Michael)

The outdoor program provides a catalyst for service toward others and inclusion. Groups are not formed the way they are typically formed in high school, and members rely on one another physically and socially throughout the trip. Regardless of faith orientation, students felt the urge to unconditionally care for their participants; some student leaders noticed that this practice continued beyond the trip.

**Spiritual Growth**

Spiritual growth was not mentioned at all in the non-faith-based programs. Twelve of the sixteen student leaders in the faith-based programs reported personal spiritual growth from their leadership experience. No questions about spiritual matters or spiritual growth were asked, though follow-up questions were asked if students mentioned issues of spirituality. Perhaps a more rich description of the student understanding of spiritual growth and matters of faith on the trip could have been achieved with direct questions, but it is interesting nonetheless to see what students shared without being prompted. Students in the
faith-based programs believed that they and their participants experienced spiritual growth during the course of the trip. "Whenever I'm in the [wilderness], I always feel like I then come back and I've grown a lot more spiritually just from being exposed to so many different opinions and then the conversations that come up. It's just... Like I always come back, and I have so many thoughts and things that I want to think about" (Jill). Two main themes relating to spiritual growth included dependence on God and learned and practiced prayer.

**Dependence on God**

Students in faith-based programs described a shift in their dependence upon God. They attributed their trip leadership experience with an increasing level of trust and expectation that God is in control of all aspects of a given situation.

I'm still not super patient, but just learning that I wasn't in control even though I was the leader—ultimately, God's in control—and that I didn't know if we were going to have high tide or that we were going to have a bunch of rain or our food was going to get stolen by raccoons or something like that... patience and then flexibility was a huge thing. Just learning that yeah, I'm not in control and that I need to—we make the plans, I have time to be in the know—but ultimately when you look back at those plans, I didn't follow any of them. (Maria)

This student perceived that once she recognized that "ultimately, God's in control" her ability to exercise patience and flexibility increased. Another student discussed the idea that results from her efforts are not created by
I was really struck by the faithfulness of God and how it's not about me and what I can do . . . I was so amazed how sometimes all I'd have to do is set up this simple activity and I feel like God would speak really powerful[ly] through that. I was like, "Wow, that wasn't me and what I facilitated." Sometimes the things that I didn't even plan ended up being the most impactful for people. (Amanda)

Anna echoed a similar sentiment regarding God overseeing the spiritual outcomes of the experience.

I've led several trips since them, not with [the outdoor orientation program], but there is always insecurity at first with a new group. I feel very confident in the wilderness and confident that God will do something. I don't know, I guess there's confidence outside of myself now, but I'm always insecure . . . it's scary. (Anna)

It is interesting to note that, although the student cognitively subscribed to the idea that God is going to "do something," and has "confidence outside herself," Anna still admitted to feelings of insecurity and fear at the outset of a new wilderness trip. She went on to discuss the reality that believing that the results are God's work does not erase her role in the process and that welcoming a new group into an intensive wilderness trip will always bring an element of initial nervousness.

**Learned and Practiced Prayer**

Many students in the faith-based programs discussed differences in the frequency, motivation, and confidence of their prayers.
I knew how to pray, I guess, but I learned how to pray again. My co-leader was very spirit-led and part of the reason that my previous [trip leadership] experience had been really difficult is because my co-leader and I didn’t pray. I wanted to, and I would go out and try to create time, but she just wasn’t willing to, or she didn’t have time. I don’t exactly know what happened, but we didn’t pray and it was difficult. I felt really unsupported and alone, but through this, I learned how to... rely on God and you’re completely dependent on him but you want to as well. It’s not like a chore or a task or like, “I have to do this before I go to bed.” I think that’s maybe how it started out, “You have to pray now,” or “It’s the morning, we have to pray.” Toward the end of the trip, it started to become more natural. It’s automatically the first thing you do when you wake up. You don’t really think about it, you just start the day in prayer. I think those habits have carried over and I started to realize it is okay. It’s more than okay, it’s desirable and it’s right and it’s what we’re called to do, to be constantly in prayer. I guess forming those habits was really helpful for me. I guess maybe I was supposed to have known that already because it’s what I’m teaching those kids, or freshmen. (laughing) They’re three years younger than me, so they’re kids. (Lydia)

Lydia attributed significant changes to the way she prays to her trip leadership experience—her co-leader’s influence on that experience, in particular. First, she noted that she “learned” to pray again on the trip. She cited examples from a previous trip leadership experience during which she believes a lack of prayer adversely affected the trip. Second, she indicated a shift in her motivation to pray—a move from duty to a habitual element of her daily routine. This shift was accompanied by a change in attitude from seeing prayer as something that is “okay” to something that is “desirable” and what she is “called to do.” She went on to describe the specific ways in which her prayer life continued to change after her trip.
I think I pray with more confidence. I pray with more assurance that God will hear and will answer... I saw the way prayer changes and prayer matters and how the Spirit leads [so many times]. [I]nstead of something abstract—I’m speaking to the sky or the roof of my tent or whatever—it became more... real, and you see the way that God works through the prayers that you say. (Lydia)

For Lydia, prayer changed from meaningless spoken words to an authentic conversation with God. It moved from abstract to reality.

Another student described a shift toward constant prayer that bridged the gap that he had previously perceived between prayer and reality.

Last summer was marked by ... in my head, just constant prayer, whenever I close my eyes, I’ll be praying for the group and it was constantly dependence and constantly thinking of, oh, how can we make this better, how can we approach God together... I was in charge of a good amount of the devotionals. How can I draw this out? How can we learn from this experience some more? How can I engage with that person about his depression? How can I engage with that person with isolation? (Erik)

For Erik and others, daily reliance upon prayer is linked to dependence on God. Erik was not saying quick meaningless prayers before a meal, he was praying about meaningful issues of faith, depression, and isolation.

Prayer became a serious spiritual tool for inquiry and meditation.

Ross remembered an important moment from the trip when he prayed “the most sincere, powerful prayer” he had ever prayed:

I remember right before I went to [the outdoor orientation program], I just prayed probably the most sincere, powerful prayer I ever prayed: that God would break down any walls that I had still up between me and Him. I was out of everything I was doing before, but I still it just didn’t feel like I was in touch with God, really. My behavior is fine now, but I’m still missing something. Through staff training and just being in a very intentional Christian community,
God really revealed himself.... We did [a solo] on our staff training trip. It was probably the most powerful spiritual experience that I ever had. (Ross)

Ross had been changing his behavior without perceiving spiritual transformation, which he experienced during the solo of his staff training trip. He understood this moment to be the “most powerful spiritual experience” he had ever had (Ross).

As stated in Chapter 4, student leaders often felt responsible for the spiritual growth of their participants. Student leaders within the faith-based programs reported being frustrated when their participants did not take the trip as seriously as they believed it should be taken.

The nervousness came... mostly just left and translated more into frustration over the course of the trip because of what we saw at the beginning versus how they played out day-to-day which is like I wasn’t nervous, it was just frustration after that. (Beth)

Beth referenced in the above quote described her desire for students to grow spiritually on her trip and her subsequent frustration when her group members did not share her vision for the trip.

Student leaders in faith-based programs described spiritual changes in terms of depending on God and habitual prayer. The spiritual focus of the two faith-based programs stands in sharp contrast to the other two programs, where spiritual topics did not arise once over the course of 20 interviews. A student leader offered one reason that spiritual topics might be avoided in some programs. “We also wanted to avoid topics that can
make people uncomfortable, like alcohol and drugs and things like that, where obviously some kids coming in have lots more experience than others and the leaders might have more experience or less experience than the kids coming in. You just don't want to talk about things that could be sensitive" (Chloe). Chloe sought to avoid a discussion of sensitive topics, while the students in the faith-based programs wanted to talk about sensitive issues of faith.

**Summary**

Students from all four programs perceived increases in confidence and interpersonal ability. Confidence, as defined by the student leaders who participated in this study, is best understood according to the themes of transferring acquired competence to new domains, finding one's voice in social situations, and developing leadership self-efficacy. Interpersonal ability is increased as students navigate the co-leader relationship and learn to articulate personal needs, resolve conflict, and collaborate with another individual. The general responsibilities of social facilitation cause many students to enter future social contexts with a heightened awareness of people who may be excluded or marginalized; a number of students believed that their leadership experience fostered a desire to reach out to those individuals. Finally, students within faith-based programs reported experiencing spiritual growth as a result of their
outdoor orientation leadership experience. They most often characterized this growth as an increased dependence on God as well as changes in the frequency, motivation, and confidence of their prayers.
CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Discussion

This study sought to uncover how student leaders within outdoor orientation programs understand the value and significance of their training and experience, what aspects of the experiences fostered value or significance, and whether there were any notable differences between leadership experiences in faith-based versus non-faith-based programs. Students place high value on these experiences, and perceived benefits of the leadership role are shared across the four programs examined in this study. This chapter begins with a diagram that outlines the essence of the shared experience of 36 student leaders from four outdoor orientation programs. Subsequent research questions are answered as links are explored between the findings from this study, Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of student identity development, and stage-environment fit theory.

Major themes common across all four programs are summarized in the following diagram. Only thematic elements present within all programs are represented in the diagram. Although spiritual growth was
a meaningful aspect of the trip leadership experience within faith-based
programs, it is not included in this diagram because spiritual growth was
not mentioned within non-faith-programs. No element within this
representation of the collective lived experience of student leaders in
outdoor orientation programs is meant to be understood as a rigid or final
achievement. The perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and resulting effects of a
given experience of this nature are more akin to movement along a
continuum than arrival at a final destination. For example, students
described the generation of confidence as a general end result of these
experiences while also noting that personal confidence can always grow
or decrease in future challenges.
Figure 1: Stages of the Trip Leader Experience

- Students perceive the task/goal as important or worthwhile
- Students perceive a high level of responsibility for their role in the success of the endeavor

- Students are nervous about the leadership role
- Students question their ability to competently achieve program goals

- Participants show up, and student leaders project competence that they don't feel
- Competence is experienced through legitimizing moment(s) dealing with group problems, issues, or needs
- Students internalize the competence and "grow into" the leadership role

- Transferring internalized competence
- Finding one's voice
- Increased confidence
- Leadership self-efficacy

- Students leave the experience with a new understanding of their ability and potential
- Increased ability to resolve interpersonal conflict
- Task-focused relationships
- Social-focused relationships
Four Stages of the Trip Leadership Experience

Figure 1 arranges the essential nature of the trip leadership experience into four stages. In Stage 1, a valued task is entrusted to students. This value originates most often in positive participant experiences. Students feel responsible for different aspects of the experience, but all feel responsible for the success of the program in some way. Student leaders describe the environment of outdoor orientation programs as being characterized by perceived importance and responsibility.

Stages 2 and 3 illustrate the student's response to the environment of the trip leadership experience. Stage 2 begins with a student response of nervousness. Students are nervous about different aspects of the experience, but all are nervous about something as the trip begins. This leads to or is accompanied by questions about their ability to competently achieve all the goals they feel responsible to accomplish.

In Stage 3, students respond by projecting competence. Participants arrive, and as the trip begins, leaders feel compelled to project an image of competence, whether or not they feel fully competent. Many students project competence while still feeling nervous about their ability to lead effectively. Over the course of the experience, students describe moments of recognizing personal competence through a legitimizing episode of dealing with group's issues, problems, or needs.
As student leaders feel useful or effective in their role, they internalize the previously projected sense of competence. A new understanding of personal ability emerges, and student leaders experience a shift in their perspective of themselves as capable of trip leadership.

Stage 4 comprises the perceived outcomes that students attribute to the preceding three stages. At the culmination of the trip leadership experience, student respondents believe that the role shaped their identity in three major ways. First, the most commonly described change is increased confidence; this refers to the belief in one's personal capability to be successful in the face of adversity; one's belief in the value of his or her perspective, leading to an ability to exercise his or her voice appropriately; and one's belief in his or her proficiency for leadership. Second, students recognize interpersonal growth, described by a better ability to work well with others and facilitate social situations. The third change that students recognized is spiritual growth.

For the students of this study, environmental factors of perceived importance and responsibility create a student response of questioning, projecting, and internalizing competence. Achieved competence then impacts the manner in which students enter new situations, especially challenging situations or leadership opportunities.

The significance of the findings from this study can be further understood through the lens of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors for
student development, the stage-environment fit theory of Eccles et al. (1993), Bandura's (1977, 1986) self-efficacy construct as applied to perceptions leadership ability, and Bell's (2003) work explaining the significance of rites of passage experiences in university outdoor orientation programs.

**Seven Vectors of Student Development**

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) psychosocial theory is based on seven vectors of student development. Movement along the vectors can occur in any order, the rate of growth can vary, and development in one vector can interact with development in other vectors. Progress along each of these vectors allows individuals to "grow in versatility, strength, and ability to adapt when unexpected barriers and pitfalls appear" (p. 35). According to the themes generated in this study, outdoor orientation program student leaders report growth in at least four of Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships.

**Developing Competence**

Chickering and Reisser describe competence as a three-tined pitchfork consisting of intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence. As student leaders of outdoor orientation programs describe the process of projecting and internalizing
competence, they do not indicate growth in terms of intellectual
competence, but do perceive personal development in physical and
manual skills and interpersonal confidence.

**Managing Emotions**

Students describe becoming more aware of both their personal
feelings and those of the group they were leading. Co-leader
relationships and group dynamic issues create multiple levels of practice
for these skills. As student leaders develop their ability to interact with
others effectively through articulating personal needs and desires,
managing conflict resolution, and collaborating toward common goals,
they experience personal development in managing emotions. Through
the process of learning to facilitate social interactions among their peers,
students report leaving the outdoor orientation leadership experience with
a new awareness of social situations and social needs.

**Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence**

Student leaders experience autonomy within their leadership role.
The responsibility they perceive for the trip is heightened by this reality.
The role of trip leadership provides an additional layer of separation
between the student leader and his or her authorities and institutional
support systems, placing students into a situation that requires "choosing,
deciding, deliberating, reflecting, planning, and judging" (Dearden, 1972,
in Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 117). Students immersed in this
environment recognize their impact upon the experience of others. The trip offers students a distinct departure from being responsible only for themselves. Chickering and Reisser recognized that “autonomy may be well developed, but sensitivity and patience lag behind” (p. 142). As students in this study increased their social awareness, they linked this awareness to a desire to support others socially. Moving beyond a self-serving use of autonomy to advocate for personal interests, students describe an increasing desire to offer their acceptance toward marginalized members of social groups. The experience provides student leaders with a heightened sense of the value of “courtesy, engagement, and cooperation” (p. 142), developed through their experience of the collective potential of their group unified by common goals.

**Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships**

Growth along this vector is defined by a shift from ignorance or intolerance of differences toward a tolerance and appreciation of differences. Some student leaders describe the trip experience as the first time they had been subjected to a community of individuals whom they had not chosen or naturally gravitated toward. In this environment, participants and leaders alike learn to understand and appreciate each other’s differences. Additionally, the co-leader dynamic presents a shortened but intensive epoch of learning that may increase students’ capacity for intimacy, in that it places two individuals into a
semiprofessional relationship characterized by conflict resolution and collaboration.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) developmental vectors ideally already occur during the college years, but student leaders within outdoor orientation programs report experiencing accelerated growth. Data from this study suggests that the lived experience of leading an outdoor orientation program trip enhances students' developmental needs by accelerating growth along the vectors of developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships. If accelerated growth occurs as a result of trip leadership, students who receive these opportunities may experience greater overall growth in college.

The second research question of this study asks: What aspects of the training and experience do trip leaders attribute these changes? Data from this study does not lend itself to a simple answer. As the changes students felt during their training and experience were nuanced and broad, the reasons that these changes occurred proved correspondingly extensive. However, stage-environment fit theory lends a general explanation to the question, and data from this study offers insight into at least two factors of environmental fit for college student leadership development.
**Stage-Environment Fit**

Themes from the data generated in this study indicate that student leaders of outdoor orientation program trips perceive accelerated growth along at least four of Chickering & Reisser’s (2003) vectors of development. Assuming that college students share a stage of life characterized by similar developmental needs, it appears that the outdoor orientation trip leadership role offers an environment that matches those needs and produces growth. As hypothesized in Chapter 2, stage-environment fit provides a useful theory for predicting positive outcomes within a higher education context. Combining an understanding of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vectors for student development, stage-environment fit theory, and the data generated in this study, environmental factors descriptive of the ideal “fit” between college students’ needs and opportunities emerge (Midgley et al., 2002). Major themes in the data suggest two elements of the environment that contribute to the growth that students described: student perceptions of importance and multifaceted levels of responsibility.

Elements of importance and responsibility create a sense of pre-trip nervousness leading students to project and internalize competence, which appears to accelerate personal identity development. These are not the only factors driving the value of the outdoor orientation experience, and they are not presented as the only two factors necessary...
in developing an environment fit for growth among Chickering and Reisser’s vectors. However, data from this study indicates that importance and responsibility are two valuable aspects of the environmental fit. If it is important for students to feel ownership over an experience they value as important, then current outdoor orientation programs and other student leadership opportunities may be evaluated and improved by considering ways to foster these environmental factors for student leaders.

Leadership Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy as proposed by Bandura (1977, 1986) refers to one’s belief in his or her ability to effectively perform within a given domain. Bandura’s concept was expanded by Wood and Bandura (1989), who described self-efficacy as a motivating force toward effective action in a given situation. Murphy (2002) applied the concept of self-efficacy to leadership, and a study by Komives et al. (2006) demonstrated that leadership self-efficacy foster leadership identity development.

Building upon the work of Fields (2010), this study adds depth to our understanding of how and why the student trip leaders in outdoor orientation programs experience increases in leadership self efficacy. Confidence in one’s ability to be a leader increased as students experienced the leadership role firsthand. Student comments indicated that experiential learning as described by Kolb (1984) led to reflection, abstract generalization, and application of these beliefs toward future
leadership opportunities. Students understood the outdoor orientation leadership role to be an important position; for some, it was the first leadership role that they viewed as significant. This is due in part to feelings of responsibility for the experience, safety, and growth of others.

**Rites of Passage**

Bell (2003) researched the use of Van Gennep's (1960) three-stage system of rites of passage in outdoor orientation programs. Traditional rites of passage experiences are characterized by an initial stage of separation, a liminal stage, and a final stage of reincorporation to community. The liminal stage was described as a catalyst for growth caused in part by being “betwixt and between” life roles (Turner, 1974). The trip leader experience may be structurally similar to correlate with some aspects of Van Gennep's (1960) traditional rites of passage model in their transition from student/participant to leader, but the change is not fully supported in most contemporary models (Bell, 2003). As students move from a stage of being a participant to a leader, the students enter a liminal phase or experience, but with no ritual or effective recognition process that assuages their fear of failing to achieve legitimacy in the leadership role. The feelings of nervousness and fears of appearing incompetent are resolved through episodic moments of recognizing their personal ability to effectively lead their group. The manner in which students describes their feelings before, during, and after the trip
leadership experience suggests that they may experience Van Gennep's (1960) liminal stage as they transition from the role of a trip participant to the role of a trip leader. Bell (2003) asserts that university outdoor orientation programs are generally organized to mimic a rites of passage model for the transition from the role of high school student to college student, even though he states that the contemporary models often lack effective role definition and sociality belief in transformative experiences (pp. 48-49). Data from this study indicates that students adopt the outdoor orientation leadership role but often report feeling that the role is beyond their capabilities. A rites of passage experience may structurally explain the transformation of student's perceptions of personal leadership ability from participant to leader. In a classic rites of passage model the change from one role to another is often an organized through ritual and celebration to help solidify new role position through social recognition (Van Gennep, 1960). However, instead of rituals and social pressure to help define this leadership role, student leaders are left to internalize a new role through their own evaluation of legitimizing experiences, in which they interpret their success throughout their first outdoor leadership experience. The students in this study may be in a liminal stage based upon their lack of confidence in their ability to effectively execute the multifaceted aspects of responsibility they attribute to the leadership role. In this study, social recognition and reinforcement exist, but are not as
overt or ritualized in the same manner. This role change seems resolved, not through ceremony, but through the realization that they are performing leadership role effectively, and this role transition is consistent with Bell’s Contemporary Adventure Model (2003) that expresses a misuse of a rites of passage by not attending to the reincorporation phase. In this study, student leaders view themselves as a legitimate after success in proving to themselves that they are capable of the new role. Although the title of leader has been previously provided to them, it is only after they have “legitimizing experiences” such as answering questions from group members, lighting the stove properly, reading the map, etc. that they feel they have made the transition to the role of an outdoor orientation program trip leader.

Student leaders seem to experience the transition without the ritual associated with a traditional rites of passage model. Future research could address incorporation of a ritual celebrating the transition from participant to leader. This may enhance student development outcomes student leaders perceived in this study.

**Differences In Faith-Based Programs**

Data from this study presents more commonalities than differences between the student leader experience in faith-based and non-faith-based programs: common themes across all four programs have provided the basis for understanding the value of the student leadership
experience. The most prominent difference between the two program types is the benefit of spiritual growth experienced in faith-based programs. The topic of spirituality was not mentioned within the two non-faith-based programs. It is possible that these differences may be attributed to cultural norms of the institutions where the programs operate. Faith-based institutions are likely to attract students more interested in spiritual growth, and the culture of the institution may enhance that desire as well. Student leaders from faith-based programs perceived personal and participant benefits from conversations about ontological questions. Students within the faith-based programs valued the opportunity to discuss questions of meaning within the context of their small group on the trip. This finding suggests that programmatic curriculum affects student outcomes from the outdoor orientation experience. Non-faith-programs may foster deeper transformative experiences if they provide opportunities for discussion of spiritual matters.

Implications

The findings of this study describe the value and significance that students place upon their leadership experience within an outdoor orientation program. This knowledge has implications for administrators at colleges and universities as well as for directors of outdoor orientation programs.
Research supports the notion that outdoor orientation program trips provide valuable experiences for participants, and this study provides evidence that student leaders of these program perceive meaningful growth as well. Students in this study believed their outdoor orientation leadership experience increased their leadership ability and conflict resolution skills. If outdoor orientation programs can provide a leadership environment that directly supports institutional goals of leadership development, colleges and universities may want to consider founding or expanding programs like these in an effort to promote student development.

The rich description of how students perceive this particular leadership experience should foster further discussion about how outdoor leadership positions may enhance both institutional aims and student needs. Additionally, the findings of this study may be applied to student experiences beyond outdoor orientation. Thematic elements of importance and responsibility shown to promote positive outcomes for the students of this study may be able to be replicated in other contexts. Leadership development programs operating at higher education institutions may benefit from an examination of the level of importance students place upon their leadership role and the level of responsibility students perceive in a given experience. Evaluating the extent to which
leadership development programs are characterized by these themes may indicate areas for improvement or opportunity.

For institutions that value leadership development, outdoor orientation programs may provide one avenue for offering students important leadership experiences. Given the ability of outdoor orientation programs to provide meaningful learning experiences for student leaders, these programs may warrant institutional funding and support.

Other campus leadership positions may entrust students with similar responsibilities and potentially similar effects. As discussed in chapter two, athletic team captains, resident advisors, and peer mentors benefit from their leadership roles (Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010; Byrne, 1998; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Not all students are able to experience a leadership role, and these experiences are difficult to provide to a large number of individuals. Outdoor orientation programs provide meaningful student leadership roles on the college campus, and allow a higher number of students to experience transformational leadership opportunities.

Outdoor Orientation Program Directors

Program directors must recognize potential development opportunities for student leaders. Outdoor orientation programs exist primarily to serve first year students, but data from this study supports the hypothesis that student leaders may also experience substantial growth. Programs that do not currently place students in leadership roles should
consider whether doing so may promote program or institutional goals.

Some outdoor orientation programs contract with outside agencies (ie. Outward Bound) to facilitate their outdoor orientation programs. This study illustrates the value students ascribe to their trip leadership experience, and may encourage program directors to consider training students for these leadership positions. Incorporating student leadership roles may enhance pursuit of program or institutional goals. On the other hand, programs considering outsourcing their outdoor orientation leadership positions should weigh the valuable leadership development opportunities lost by outsourcing.

Leader training programs could utilize data from this study to enhance learning outcomes toward increased leadership development and conflict resolution skills. Leaders who come into the experience with a desire to grow may become more open to reflection and transformation regarding the potential learning outcomes. Pre- and post-trip debriefing/feedback sessions may be intentionally structured to discuss desired outcomes. Finally, transference of learning to other contexts (social, academic, career) may be enhanced by intentional reflection and mentoring.

Program directors who understand the benefits students perceive as a result of their leadership role may be able to facilitate the value of these experiences more effectively, fostering increased development of their
student leaders. Developing systems for reintegration and support in students' new leadership role may enhance the trip leadership opportunity as a lasting transformative learning experience, whereas some aspects of the learning will likely be forgotten or lost otherwise. Student leaders could work together to develop language for the skills, ability, and confidence they may have acquired during the course of their leadership experience. Considering ways in which students desire these meaningful lessons to shape the goals for their return to the campus community may help nurture transformational growth in student leaders.

Regarding spirituality, collaboration between faith-based programs and non-faith-based programs may promote depth of experience for program participants and student leaders. Noddings (1992) advocates for thoughtful consideration of the existential questions often ignored in school (a trend that sometimes continues into higher education). Without defaulting to dogmatic persuasion, students desire safe contexts within which they can ponder questions of identity, meaning, morality, and human destiny. In a later work, Noddings (2003) urges educators to consider spiritual connections between people, places, and everyday life to increase spiritual awareness. The degree to which metaphysical dialogue is accepted or even expected within institutions certainly varies. This study provides evidence that spiritual growth is possible within the context of outdoor orientation program trips; this opportunity warrants
thoughtful consideration.

Finally, program directors seem to play a significant role in framing and shaping these student leadership experiences. Students remembered specific moments when their program director framed the outdoor orientation trip as an important event.

**Methodological Implications**

Phenomenology provided an ideal approach to the research questions of this study. By aligning my efforts toward understanding the lived experience of student leaders, I have uncovered a nuanced and rich understanding of the student leadership role within four outdoor orientation programs. The methodological decision to utilize a unique post-trip response paper and forego Seidman's (2006) three-interview structure provided an opportunity to essentially triple the number of respondents who participated in the study. The additional perspectives provided richness and value to the findings. Had I conducted the study with only ten students, depending upon which students were selected, it could have limited my ability to accurately understand the lived experience of trip leaders. Moreover, a contextual understanding of students' backgrounds was adequately captured within the post-trip response and the single in-depth interview. However, because multiple interviews with each respondent did not occur, some depth and clarity of findings were limited. For example, it would have been interesting to ask
the non-faith students questions about whether they experienced spiritual
growth from their trip leadership experience. It would also have been
interesting to explore students' understanding of spiritual growth more
thoroughly. There is a body of literature that examines intrinsic spiritual
benefits of the wilderness context (Nagle, 2005; Uhlik, 2009) and ways the
wilderness context can be used to foster spiritual growth (Bobilya, Akey,
provides an in-depth examination of backcountry recreation enthusiasts'
conceptual understanding of spiritual growth that they attribute to time
spent in the wilderness. Within this study, evidence did not support the
claim that the wilderness context automatically fosters spiritual growth.
Instead, it appears that the curriculum matters most in determining
outcomes from the outdoor orientation experience (Bell & Holmes, 2011).
Future research could examine this issue in more depth.

The post-trip response essay may be utilized in other contexts where
research questions are designed to understand the value or significance
of a specific event or experience occurring within a predictable
timeframe, but researchers should be aware that sacrificing Seidman's
(2006) three interview structure does inhibit ability to pursue areas of
interest within the data in subsequent interviews with research
participants.
Limitations

It is possible that trip leaders who opted to participate in this study may have skewed the findings of the perceived student experience in at least two ways. First, information about the lived experiences of the participant trip from those who self-selected to return to the program to lead trips is likely to be positively biased. In other words, students who had positive participant trip experiences were probably more likely to return as trip leaders. However, this was not always the case, as illustrated by the counterexample in Chapter 4. Some student leaders who participated in this study did not have a positive participant experience. The negative participant experience did not inhibit leadership development opportunities for that specific student as she became a trip leader.

Second, students who perceived positive personal development as a result of their trip leadership experience may have been more likely to participate in this research study. Given the fact that within one program, 8 of the 10 leaders participated, and within another, all 8 who were asked to participate chose to do so, this is unlikely to be a significant limitation within at least two of the programs included in the study.

I wish to advise caution against generalizing the lived experiences of these students to all student leaders of outdoor orientation programs. This project examined the lived experiences of 36 individuals within four specific programs.
Future Research

More research is needed to determine the impact of student perceptions of importance and responsibility upon both student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and leadership self-efficacy. Findings from the current study affirm previous work by Fields (2010), indicating increases in leadership self-efficacy among student trip leaders in five distinct programs. Further research is needed to determine whether leadership self-efficacy is increasing for all outdoor orientation program student leaders.

Further study is also warranted on the specific ways these experiences are affected by the backcountry context. How are the outcomes of this study changed by the wilderness environment? Future quantitative studies should consider measuring leadership development constructs across student leaders in multiple campus contexts (i.e. athletics, residence life, peer mentor programs, etc.) to determine similarities and differences in outcomes for student leaders.

Another important finding is that the focus on the program’s curriculum matters. As the focus of the curriculum changed, specific outcomes such as whether or not students perceived spiritual growth also varied. This is important to program directors as many positive or negative messages could be promoted depending upon the consideration of the outdoor orientation programs curriculum.
Conclusion

Student leaders from this study believe this role was important in their personal development, increasing their confidence to handle future challenges, confidence in the value of their perspective and offer it in groups, and confidence toward future leadership opportunities. They also perceived an increased ability to resolve interpersonal conflict. Higher education devotes substantial resources to leadership development and values this goal. Providing students with engaging opportunities to accept responsibility and ownership over experiences they value could strengthen leadership development programs employed across university campuses nationwide. Students described the outdoor orientation leadership role as one of the most important educational experiences in college.
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01-Apr-2010

Starbuck, David
Education, Morrill Hall
255 Grapevine Road
Wenham, MA 01984

IRB #1: 4851
Study: Preliminary Dissertation Topic Interviews
Approval Date: 29-Mar-2010

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/lrb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

JULIE F. SIMPSON
Manager

cc: File
Bell, Brent
University of New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

12-Jun-2012

Starbuck, David
Education, Morrill Hall
255 Grapevine Road
Wenham, MA 01984

IRB #: 4851
Study: Preliminary Dissertation Topic Interviews
Study Approval Date: 29-Mar-2010
Modification Approval Date: 06-Jun-2012
Modification: Additional subjects & addition of survey

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved your modification to this study, as indicated above. Further changes in your study must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. This document is available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources or from me.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
    Bell, Brent