8-9-2010

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UNH Research: More Freshmen Starting College With Outdoor Orientation

August 9, 2010

DURHAM, N.H. – This coming month, more than 15,000 college freshmen will get their first taste of college life not in a dorm or a classroom but in the nation’s woods, mountains, and waterways. New research by a University of New Hampshire professor has found that outdoor orientation programs, typically backcountry trips led by upperclassmen that occur prior to the start of college, have been increasing significantly since 2000 and are as common at public institutions as at elite private colleges.

Brent Bell, assistant professor of outdoor education at UNH, conducted the first-ever census of outdoor orientation programs at the nation’s colleges, finding that of the 1,758 four-year residential colleges in the U.S., 164 – nine percent – reported having an outdoor orientation program. In addition, Bell found that such programs are gaining in popularity: since 2000, an average of 10 new programs have started each year, and nearly half of all programs report increasing enrollment.

The study, “A Census of Outdoor Orientation Programs at Four-Year Colleges in the United States,” was published in the most recent issue of the Journal of Experiential Education.

“Most universities in the country – about 95 percent – do something to help first-years adjust to college,” says Bell. “We never knew how prevalent outdoor orientation programs were, but now we see they’re becoming a more common model for integrating first-year students into the university experience.” The number of students participating in such programs in 2006, the year the census was taken, is more than five times the number of students who participated in National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) programs and two-thirds the number who participated in Outward Bound that same year.

Bell and his co-authors – UNH master’s student Marion Holmes and research assistant Brady Williams -- were surprised to find that outdoor orientation are as common at public universities as at elite private colleges; they are distributed proportionally between public and private institutions, and their geographic range reflects the geographic distribution of colleges and universities. “Although the majority of outdoor orientation programs exist at private colleges, it is important to note that the majority – 70 percent – of all four-year colleges in the United States are private,” says Bell.

Bell notes that all eight Ivy League colleges have an outdoor orientation program (Brown’s is for rising sophomores rather than first-years) and represent some of the longest-established programs. Dartmouth College launched its program, the first, in 1932, and through the 1970s many other Ivies followed suit.

The study surveyed all 164 programs on a variety of characteristics, from size, age and cost to trip characteristics (75 percent of the programs backpack, for instance, and 69 percent use tents as opposed to tarps or cabins) as well as risk management practices like staff training and access to medical professionals. ”It’s interesting that although colleges are generally becoming more risk-averse, these programs are growing,” says Bell. “That’s a sign that there are some good risk-management systems in place.”
Despite outdoor orientation programs’ growth and popularity, Bell says he and his research team struggled to identify many programs within their institutions’ administrative structures. Researchers contacted five different offices at one university, for instance, each one with no knowledge of the outdoor orientation program, before learning that a program had existed there for more than two decades.

“There are some great long-term programs that have evidence of making a great impact on students, but they’re disconnected from their institutions,” says Bell.

Bell has been researching various aspects of outdoor orientation programs since he wrote his doctoral dissertation in 2005; he is currently updating his census of outdoor orientation programs for 2011. Prior to joining the UNH faculty, he directed outdoor orientation programs at Harvard University and New England College in Henniker. He notes that almost universally, participants in such programs describe them as being one of their greatest college experiences, and they can be effective at engaging students in positive norms and peer-group interactions, prized by college student-service staff.

“Traditional college orientations have often focused on introducing students to the institution – the policies, registration practices, or campus layout – but have not always provided a successful way for students to develop deep social connections,” he says. “Outdoor orientation programs can really transfer social connections made in the woods into a great start to college.”

The complete study is available here: http://www.aee.org/publications/jee/Bell

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

Photographs available to download:
Caption: Brent Bell, assistant professor of outdoor education at the University of New Hampshire, has published new research on the growing popularity of outdoor orientation programs at colleges and universities throughout the U.S.
Credit: Meagan Jeffs.

Caption: Outdoor orientation programs, like this backpacking trip in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, are growing in number, finds new research from the University of New Hampshire.
Credit: Brent Bell.

Reporters and editors: Brent Bell is available at bbell@unh.edu or 617-784-7995 (cell). He is in the field leading an outdoor orientation trip and not available between Saturday, August 21 and Friday, August 27, 2010.

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