

THE LIFE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERGRADUATE OUTDOOR ACADEMIC
PROGRAMS: ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES

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By

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ABSTRACT

THE LIFE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERGRADUATE OUTDOOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS: ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES

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Undergraduate outdoor academic programs have existed in the United States of America since the 1970s. These programs necessitate financial support, copious time from students and faculty, access to outdoor spaces, and specialized training for faculty, and so despite a strong academic tradition, these programs are challenging to justify to college administrators. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. To address the gap in the literature, this study utilized a significant life experience theoretical framework and engaged alumni of three longstanding undergraduate outdoor academic programs via an Internet survey. The results indicate that respondents found their undergraduate outdoor academic program to be extremely impactful on their career whether their current work is in the outdoor industry or another field.

Keywords: higher education, outdoor academic program, Significant Life Experience

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Outdoor academic programs in higher education are necessary to provide training to future outdoor industry employees who work in the \$1.1 trillion outdoor recreation economy in the United States of America (Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, 2023). However, even as the industry is booming, outdoor academic program budgets are being reduced and entire programs are getting cut across higher education (Turner et al., 2022). There is an urgent need to ascertain and assert the value of these degrees to college and university administrators (Seaman et al., 2017). The alumni perspective is critical to increase our understanding of the long-term impacts of studying in and graduating from outdoor academic programs, specifically to understand the ways in which skills and knowledge transfer to careers.

Possessing a variety of names (“Parks and Recreation Management,” “Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education,” or “Outdoor Program Management” to name a few), outdoor academic programs can be located in a variety of colleges (i.e., Health, Education, or Business) across the United States of America (Jostad et al., 2023). For this thesis, I am using the term “outdoor academic program” or “OAP” to refer to any undergraduate degree-granting program that has an outdoor education or outdoor leadership component (Turner et al., 2022). OAPs that emphasize adventure have existed since the 1970s (Guthrie et al., 2012), but in recent years more programs are being eliminated by college and university administrations. Indeed, few people know of OAPs or job opportunities that might be afforded to OAP alumni (Seaman et al., 2017).

Why are OAPs Being Cut?

A census of OAPs completed in 2021 found there were 128 higher education OAPs in operation in the United States (Bell et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2022). However, that number is

already dwindling. As of October 2023, fifteen OAPs have been eliminated (Bell et al., 2024). OAPs consume a vast amount of time and financial resources compared to other programs found at universities (Potter et al., 2012) and unlike other degrees, OAPs require more face-to-face instruction, smaller class sizes, greater access to outdoor spaces, and more consequential situations (Turner et al., 2022). It is increasingly challenging to justify the resources these programs require, especially to those unfamiliar with the outdoor field particularly because we lack research which supports the value of graduating from an OAP. Administrators who are unfamiliar with the outcomes of graduating with an OAP are often the ones making the decision to close programs, and to better inform their decision to close a program, first-hand accounts of the value of an OAP are needed.

Exploring the Need to Justify OAPs as Significant

A recent, practical call for the justification of OAPs emerged from The Academy of Leisure Sciences listserv. The listserv received an email from a faculty member at Eastern Washington University (EWU) stating their program was at risk of being cut (Jostad, 2023). EWU's program was on the chopping block because a school administrator had found on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' webpage that the highest degree needed to work in the outdoor industry is a high school degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This left EWU's administrator wondering: why offer a college degree if it is unnecessary to work in that degree's field? Maningas & Simpson (2003) found that while a high school degree may be all that is necessary, 55% of hiring managers preferred to hire employees with college-level schooling. While this does not come as a shock to anyone who currently works in the outdoor industry, the challenge is that the school administrators who are making decisions about which programs to cut may not have personal knowledge of the outdoor field.

To help inform the decision that EWU's administration is making, this faculty member was reaching out, asking if anyone had data that would help them advocate the value of an OAP to their administration (Jostad, 2023). With programs closing or downsizing annually (e.g., University of Georgia, Shenandoah University, Southeast Missouri State University) and Eastern Washington University's OAP faculty fearing it may be next, research drawing connections from graduating from an OAP to a robust career is needed urgently (Turner et al., 2022).

Articulating the Value of a Degree

Higher education OAPs need information to continue to secure institutional support and to explain the value of their degree to prospective students and their families. Prior research indicates the professional value of a degree from an OAP as employers and faculty understand it (Maningas & Simpson, 2003; Taff, 2016). However, there is a notable gap in the literature expressing the potential value of OAPs on the careers of their alumni, as told by the alumni themselves. From my review of the literature, the last study examining alumni perspectives on their OAP experiences was completed in 2005 in the United Kingdom. Prince (2005) found many alumni were working in a field they perceived to be indirectly or not related at all to their undergraduate studies, and many experienced high levels of job satisfaction despite earning low salaries. Despite compelling evidence from Prince (2005), to my knowledge no similar literature with information on OAPs from the perspective of graduates has been published in the United States.

Employer and Faculty Perspectives on Professional Impact of OAPs

Eastern Washington University might consider justifying the value of their program by presenting the perspectives of employers or faculty. Seaman et al. (2017) address the question of undergraduate OAP faculty members' and employers' perceived value of a degree from an

outdoor academic program. They conducted a quantitative study of 59 programs at bachelor's degree-granting institutions and 134 companies that would potentially hire graduates from those programs. Companies selected the skills most sought when hiring, such as leadership and technical skills, and when the research team compared the skills companies sought with the skills that academic institutions felt were important with which to equip their students, the traits selected by both entities were in alignment. This led researchers to confirm that there is value in attaining a bachelor's degree from an OAP. Seaman et al.'s (2017) research supports Maningas & Simpson's (2003) similar study, even though more than a decade had passed between the studies. The consistency between the 2003 and 2017 studies suggests that despite industry changes, the needs of employers have remained stable.

Professional Value as Perceived by Alumni

The professional value as perceived by employers and faculty is as shared by Seaman et al. (2017) is persuasive data, yet it may not be enough to continue to justify OAPs.

Administrators may not find it compelling to continue to fund these expensive programs without evidence demonstrating whether the skills gained in OAPs are beneficial to alumni's careers, from the perspective of alumni themselves. Prince (2005) found that there are benefits to graduating from an OAP, with alumni believing their degree taught them important and generalizable skills like problem solving, critical thinking, oral communication, decision-making, teamwork, and self-motivation.

The Gap in the Literature

The research on alumni perspectives on OAPs as it pertains to their current careers is limited, especially in the United States. This is a notable gap in the literature. Therefore, to answer this call and to help understand how graduates are using the skills gained in the OAP

programs after graduation, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate OAP and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers.

Theoretical Framework

This research utilized a modified Significant Life Experience (SLE) theoretical framework (Chawla, 1998; Palmer, 1993; Tanner; 1980). In its inception the SLE theoretical framework was used to study the impact of environmental experiences on environmental careers or pro-environmental behaviors. Later, Daniel (2003) modified this method to be used beyond specifically environmental behaviors, and since then, other studies outside of specifically environmental research have utilized it in various contexts (Altan & Lane, 2018; Ramirez & Allison, 2023; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020). SLE is well suited to comprehending how experiences impact individuals' lives, asking the question, 'what experiences did individuals have that created lasting impact on their lives?' This lasting impact could refer to beliefs, preferences, understandings, and worldviews that are held by an individual today as a result of an experience. SLE is an appropriate theoretical framework where the intent is to learn what experiences have life-altering potential and accomplishes this intent by examining memories.

In the following chapter, I will provide a review of the literature, exploring the state of higher education within the United States, including high impact practices and the state of OAPs in higher education. I will also provide an overview of the modified significant life experience theoretical framework in greater detail. After the literature review, chapter three will contribute an explanation of the methods used in this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the impact outdoor academic programs, it is critical to begin by understanding the unique position of OAPs within higher education. As enrollment rates at colleges decline and career readiness is emphasized above all else, college programs (and especially more “niche” college programs, like OAPs) must demonstrate their value and the market they serve.

Declining Enrollment Rates in Higher Education

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, college enrollment has seen a decline (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Despite an increase in enrollment in spring of 2023, undergraduate institutions have not bounced back to their pre-pandemic enrollment numbers (Knox, 2023; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). Colleges are bracing for low enrollment numbers over next several years due to declining birthrates in the United States, rising tuition costs and students’ hesitation to take on debt to enroll in college, and increasing doubts regarding the overall value of obtaining a college degree (Gardner, 2023; Knox, 2023; Zook, 2023). As colleges navigate this trend of low enrollment, they are carefully considering how they might recruit students.

There are many things’ colleges can do to appeal to students, including partnering and innovating with other universities (Marcy, 2023) or entering the ‘Amenities Arms Race’ to be the campus with the best “things” – the most food options on campus, sparkling lab equipment, comfortable student lounges, climbing walls, and lazy rivers (McKlure, 2019). However, this literature review will focus on the career readiness initiatives that undergraduate institutions are developing, since ‘career’ is central to the research questions that are the focus of this study.

Career Readiness Initiatives in Higher Education

In a study on higher education student trends over the past 50 years, Eagan et. al. (2016) reported that 86% of students enroll in college to get a better job. Indeed, colleges have picked up on this and many have responded by developing programs to assist students in preparing for and pursuing chosen careers. Considering that many potential students are increasingly questioning the value of a college degree given its high price tag, it seems wise of colleges to connect the dots between an undergraduate education and a vibrant career (Gardner, 2023). If schools are prudent, they might integrate “High Impact Practices” or HIPs into the design of these career readiness initiatives to assist in the creation of successful programs. HIPs are elements of an undergraduate institution that have been demonstrated to be extremely effective in helping college students develop professionally, e.g., developing ePortfolios, career readiness courses, and internships (American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d., Marcy, 2023).

A Gallup-Purdue (2014) survey unveiled what they dubbed to be “The Big Six” college experiences that have been shown to indicate well-being later in life. The Big Six are one type of HIP that schools could target:

1. My professors at [Institution] cared about me as a person.
2. I had at least one professor at [Institution] who made me excited about learning.
3. While attending [Institution], I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
4. While attending [Institution], I had a job or internship that allowed me to apply what I learned in the classroom.
5. While attending [Institution] I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.

6. I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [Institution].

All of the Big Six criteria emphasize skills and relationships that last beyond college. Further, the last four criteria focus on experiences that may aid students in finding a career. Prioritizing the Big Six could create institutional cultures of prioritizing experiences and transferable skills over the title of a major. This could be beneficial as the value of specific majors is increasingly being called into question.

Questioning the Value of Undergraduate Fields

The value of certain degrees over others is a seemingly perpetual topic in higher education. Students may be choosing a degree they expect will have a high “return on investment,” in consideration of the substantial debt many incur to attend college. As shared by Gallup (2017) from 1980 to 2015, prices for goods and services rose by about 2.5 times, while the price for secondary education rose by 11 times. One of the largest purchases most will make in their lifetime, many want to make sure their return on investment is dependable; STEM-based and business majors attract many students with the understanding that students will be able to quickly secure high-income earning jobs when they graduate (Gallup, 2017). In fact, the higher the income earned by graduates, the more likely the graduate is to be satisfied with their degree choice (Gallup, 2017). Therefore, STEM-program graduates are least likely to state they would make different undergraduate education decisions if they were given the opportunity (Gallup, 2017). Given this, students see a STEM major as a reliable choice, and college administrator reasoning follows that emphasizing STEM degrees will attract more students.

Gallup (2017) found that 40% of students with a bachelor’s degree would select a different major for their college degree if they were to go back and do it all over again. Although

the study didn't cover the reason so many graduates would be interested in choosing a different degree in college, this research suggests that it is important to teach highly generalizable and transferable skills in undergraduate coursework to best equip students regardless of the career path they go down. In response to this, another goal of many career readiness initiatives is to teach students skills that are likely useful to graduates regardless of their future field, like teamwork, leadership, and communication.

OAPs are no exception to the trends listed above. Many OAPs market that they teach transferable skills, and their alumni will be able to land a job in their field of interest within a year of graduation. Further, by the inherently experiential nature and small class sizes necessary to teach skills-based outdoor academic curriculum, many OAPs are well-positioned to meet the criteria of the Big Six outlined by Gallup-Purdue (2014).

Census of Outdoor Academic Programs

Many schools in the United States offer undergraduate degrees related to outdoor education, parks and recreation management, adventure education, and outdoor leadership; and despite numerous variations upon those names, much of the content remains in alignment across programs (Martin et al., 2017; Sugerman, 1999; Taff et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2022). For the purposes of this thesis, the term "outdoor academic program" or "OAP" encompasses all of these programs to remain in alignment with Turner et al.'s (2022) description.

Pursuing an undergraduate degree in an OAP can be a clear path for students seeking to obtain strong interpersonal leadership skills, wilderness medical training, and a college education (Sugerman, 1999). OAP students often identified that a transformative experience they had prior to embarking on college influenced their desire to pursue a career in outdoor leadership, and as such have a clear vision of their hopes for their future careers, contributing to the intrinsic

motivation found in the students studying in programs (Stott et al., 2014). Programs like these can currently be found at 128 institutions in the United States (Turner et al., 2022), and despite the aforementioned name variations, most OAPs have the similar core curricular components such as courses in leadership, technical skills, teaching methods, administration, and emergency skills. (Guthrie et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2017; Sugerman, 1999). The U.S. Department of Education considers outdoor education undergraduate academic programs (or, OAPs) to be:

A program that prepares individuals to work as an educator, instructor, or facilitator in parks, recreational facilities, camps and other outdoor settings. Includes instruction in leadership skills, wilderness survival skills, first aid, group processes, counseling techniques, environmental studies, and instruction in recreational activities such as rock climbing, ropes courses, backpacking, kayaking and canoeing. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.)

Challenges Facing OAPs

Bell and colleagues (2017) outlined threats and strengths to these undergraduate degree-granting OAPs. The study found that faculty of such programs perceive the vitality of a program to be helped or hindered by the amount of institutional support the OAP received. This raises the question: Do OAPs lose funding because the programs themselves have not proven their value to an institution's administration, or does the loss of funding create a self-fulfilling prophecy preventing the programs from thriving, or both? Faculty and staff perceive their OAPs to thrive due to department heads working to publicize and market the program to the university at large - in fact, 100% of study respondents said this was crucial to the success of their programs (Potter et al., 2012). However, in the same study, many faculty and staff attributed part of the success of a program to having an outside faculty administrator, like a dean, in strong support of the

outdoor academic program, and having the appropriate financial support to support field courses was necessary. To gain administrative and financial support, it is necessary that college administrators understand the skills alumni are gaining and using in their careers after graduating from OAPs.

There are unique curricular challenges associated with OAPs in higher education that may cause students to resist pursuing the degree. Certain OAPs require immersive, semester-long, cohort-based courses with a significant trip planning and conduction component (Bell, 2017; Taff et al., 2016). Over the course of a semester like this, a cohort participates in several backcountry trips, and they might earn certifications like a Wilderness First Responder and Leave No Trace Level 1 Instructor (Bell, 2017; Taff et al., 2016). A dedicated semester provides students time to hone their skills before putting them into practice in the higher-stakes scenarios found with employment. The immersion semester model common in many OAPs has faced challenges because of its eight (or more) hours-a-day, five days (or more) a week for a semester, cohort-based model when students who have multiple priorities (e.g., family, being a student-athlete, or working a job) typically cede other responsibilities to give the semester its due diligence (Stott et al., 2014).

Given the possible contention with the immersion semester model, some programs forgo this as a curricular option or choose to emphasize other courses. However, even programs without an intensive semester-based experience often require field-based skills classes for students to learn things like navigation, campcraft, rock climbing, and paddle sports. Courses such as these typically necessitate time away from campus, often requiring transportation to and from campus. Compared to an immersion semester, field-based skills courses are minimal in their disruption to student and faculty schedules and strain on financial resources. However,

these courses still interrupt the mechanisms of college schedules, students' jobs, and athletics engagements, and to an outsider these field courses might not seem rigorous enough to justify meeting their needs. Therefore, a program requiring this amount of time in class must justify the hours involved by being certain of the quality of the degree.

Despite the issues associated with an immersion semester approach to OAPs, there are many benefits that may make it worth the associated hurdles. Big Six component five ("While attending [Institution] I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.") lends credibility to the demands on an immersion semester model (Gallup-Purdue, 2014). The immersion semester often engages in an "nine to five" structure which could serve as preparation for a job post-graduation and could contribute to feelings of bringing one's most professional self into the classroom. As in an internship, students must develop time management skills and adjust their schedules accordingly to account for their all-encompassing course load (Ross et al., 2011). Scholz et al. (2004) found that internships were helpful in promoting professionalism, agency, and general skills in students and an immersive semester might serve to increase adeptness in those areas as well. In addition to qualifying as a HIP, an immersion semester model assists in the development of generalizable skills needed for any career.

Longstanding OAPs

"Adventure leadership degree" programs were initially developed in the 1970s (Guthrie et al., 2012). Between the years 1971 and 1990, the first 23 colleges and universities created OAPs, with Mankato State University and Prescott College being the first two colleges to offer these degrees, both founded in 1971 (Canberg & Daniels, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012). Later, Brevard College, Montreat College, and Warren Wilson College (three private, liberal arts universities in western North Carolina) founded their OAPs which have each been granting

degrees for over 25 years. Withstanding occasional periods of stagnation or decline, all three of these programs remain to this day despite the aforementioned challenges to OAPs, and the persistence of small colleges eliminating their OAPs (Bell et al., 2024).

Brevard College. The Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education (WLEE) program at Brevard College was founded in 1996. The program has developed to include many technical and leadership skills courses that the students must pass to graduate with the degree. The 2023-2024 Brevard College Course Catalog describes the WLEE program:

The Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education program delivers an innovative, intensive, and experiential curriculum. The mission of the program is to promote the development of strong leaders and educators capable of effectively managing a range of outdoor experiences for a wide range of audiences in various and dynamic environments. The program is grounded in the theory and principles of leadership and experiential education and is rich with opportunity for application (p. 116).

Montreat College. The Outdoor Recreation Studies (ORS) major (formerly a B.S. in Outdoor Recreation and later a B.S. in Outdoor Education) at Montreat College was founded in 1974. The 2022-2023 Montreat College Academic Catalog asserts:

The ORS curriculum is designed to give students the skills, knowledge, and training necessary to both facilitate personal growth and interpret the natural environment for their future students/participants/clients. Management of outdoor recreation programs and experiences is an area of focus in the ORS major core, providing students in each concentration with important administration skills applicable in any number of career choices... Montreat College's Outdoor Recreation Studies program emphasizes developing students to become outdoor leaders who are competent in using outdoor

environments for education, business/program administration, and ministry. Through numerous courses and field experiences, students are prepared to design, implement, and administer outdoor programs that manage risks that are challenging, and enjoyable. Students are exposed to a variety of environmental education and outdoor leadership theories through the program's core courses, as well as, obtaining a variety of practical experience. In their concentration students will further explore an area of the ORS field, gathering a deeper understanding of theoretical, philosophical and practical factors in the chosen concentration. The ORS major and concentrations emphasize preparation for professional roles in the field. (p. 162).

Warren Wilson College. Founded three years before Brevard College's WLEE program, Warren Wilson began an Outdoor Leadership program in 1993. According to the 2022-2023 College Catalog:

The mission of the Outdoor Leadership Studies Program is to prepare graduates who have the academic background, skills, and experience necessary to analyze, plan, implement, administer, and supervise outdoor adventure education programs. The goals of the Outdoor Leadership program are the following:

- 1) To foster an understanding of the basic concepts of outdoor leadership through an integrated liberal arts and professional training curriculum.
- 2) To prepare leaders who can analyze, plan, implement, administer, and supervise outdoor adventure education programs.
- 3) To develop leaders who understand and exercise responsible leadership to promote sustainable communities.

The outdoor leadership curriculum focuses on education, facilitation, and experiential learning methodologies. It is not solely a technical skills training program. All outdoor leadership courses combine theory with practice and many incorporate service learning. The course of study includes technical skills (such as backpacking, canoeing, kayaking, and rock climbing), interpersonal skills (such as group process, counseling, and leadership), and a broad understanding of administrative issues. (p. 128).

Brevard College, Montreat College, and Warren Wilson College all have time-tested OAPs, with mission statements dedicated to the development of competent outdoor leaders. These three schools have been selected for research because of their long history as undergraduate degree-granting OAPs, and because they possess a variety of components inherent to a typical OAP (Taff et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2022). Up until 2023, each of these OAPs required that its alumni complete coursework in introductory technical skills courses, an academic internship, and a certification in wilderness medicine (Brevard College, 2023; Montreat College, 2022; Warren Wilson College, 2022). Given their successful records, these small colleges in the Southeast are exemplary programs to investigate and can create a model for future studies or for larger institutions to base their internal research. Next, to understand the worth of OAPs, it is necessary to review the research that shares the perspectives held by the faculty, employers, and students connected to OAPs.

Perspectives on Outdoor Academic Programs

The following section includes research on college faculty and employers' perceptions of skills important to working in the outdoor field and will conclude with sharing the state of the literature on alumni perspectives on their career readiness in relation to their OAP experiences.

The outdoor field and the professionals within it have been slow to decide on the best way to evaluate training programs designed to produce outdoor leaders; this has led to “the erratic development of outdoor leadership preparation programs” (Pelchat & Karp, 2012, p. 10). Research has been conducted to evaluate the core competencies needed by outdoor leaders (Priest & Gass, 1997; Raiola & Sugerman, 1999) and if undergraduate OAPs achieved training in those core competencies (Garvey & Gass, 1999; Mitchell, 1998; Sugerman 1999). More information on these competencies came to light in the early 2000s but these scholars do not address whether OAPs are successfully training their graduates to meet the standards as they were laid out (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2009). Echoing Medina (2001), Turner et al. (2022) and Hobbs et al. (2018) call for standardization of language (job titles, undergraduate OAP degree names) as well as of qualifications and standards for outdoor leaders to increase the professionalism and recognition of jobs in the outdoor field.

Faculty and employer perspectives. There has been one key study completed recently that addresses the question of undergraduate OAP faculty members’ and employers’ perceived value of holding a degree from an OAP. Seaman et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study of 59 programs at bachelor’s degree-granting institutions and 134 companies that would potentially hire graduates from those programs. When the respondents from the 134 companies were asked to select what skills were most sought when hiring, the majority selected leadership skills (87%), certifications and experience (85%), and an academic degree in a related field (43%). The study narrowed in on the leadership skills most desired, with managing risk (84%), effective communication skills (62%), and competence with technical skills (45%) deemed most valuable. The managerial skills that were viewed to be important by employers were logistics (90%), creating written support materials (71%), and equipment management (62%). The qualities

employers perceived to be important lined up with the things academic institutions felt were important to educate their students about, leading the researchers to confirm that there is value in attaining a bachelor's degree from an OAP. Seaman et al.'s (2017) research supports Maningas & Simpson's (2003) research, even though more than a decade passed between the studies. The consistency in findings across the studies suggests that despite industry changes, the needs of employers have remained stable.

Maningas & Simpson (2003) show that many staffing managers have a strong desire for prospective employees to possess a Wilderness First Responder and considerable interpersonal skills. The most notable piece of research cited in the same article is that 55% of hiring managers sought employees who had a college-level education, A clear path for students to obtain wilderness medical training, interpersonal skills, and a college degree is through an OAP (Sugerman, 1999).

Alumni perspectives. Despite the wealth of research regarding the skills and experience that employers seek, I have yet to come across any research originating in the United States that directly addresses the attributes of an OAP that alumni perceive to be the most helpful in their careers. However, research emanating from the United Kingdom does address this question; Prince (2005) conducted research tracking the career pathways of "outdoor studies" graduates and "identifying the skills developed at an undergraduate level [that may] have contributed to the careers of these graduates" (p. 22). Prince (2005) found that while 98% of the program's graduates were employed, 30% were employed in a field unrelated to their degree indicating that the interpersonal, leadership, and managerial skills gained in the program are transferable and important to continue emphasizing. Interestingly, relevance of undergraduate studies to one's career is positively correlated with well-being and alumni finding undergraduate coursework

relevant to their career is a strong predictor of their value of the program (Gallup, 2018a; Gallup 2018b). While Prince's research is a useful contribution to our understanding, it is becoming dated. There appears to be a lack of research in the past two decades that addresses the value of an OAP degree from the lens of the alumni of these programs.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

There is a demonstrated need for undergraduate degree-granting programs that prepare students for a career in the outdoor field (Turner et al., 2022). Companies strive to hire staff who have strong interpersonal skills, wilderness medical training, and a college degree (Maningas & Simpson, 2003; Seaman et al., 2017). An effective OAP can train graduates to meet the hiring criteria of outdoor organizations (Maningas & Simpson, 2003; Seaman et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2022). Yet, there appears to be little research that directly addresses the question of whether alumni believe their OAP effectively accomplished these goals. There is a need to provide higher education institutions with insights into the professional value of their programs and to assist alumni in recognizing and telling the story of this value.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. The two research questions are as follows:

1. What experiences (if any) do alumni perceive as having impacted their careers, and in what ways?
2. What components of the undergraduate outdoor academic program are perceived by alumni to be most impactful on graduates' careers?

A modified Significant Life Experience approach was utilized to answer these research questions and explore alumni perspectives about the professional impact of OAPs. Answering

these research questions with a Significant Life Experience framework provides valuable insights as to the value of OAPS and their career relevance to college administrators.

Significant Life Experience Theoretical Framework. The Significant Life Experience (SLE) theoretical framework emerged in the 1980s and was popularized by the research of Chawla (1998), Palmer (1993), and Tanner (1980). SLE is dependent on autobiographical memory and reflection to be salient, with most SLE studies conducted on how environmental experiences related to pro-environmental behaviors or careers in the environment (Chawla, 1998; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980). Daniel (2003) modified this method to be used beyond environmental behaviors specifically, and since then, other studies (Altan & Lane, 2018; Howell & Allen, 2019; Ramírez & Allison, 2023; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020) have utilized it more broadly as well. SLE has been applied in outdoor field research in relation to specific courses, such as participation in an Outward-Bound course (Daniel et al., 2022) or an OAP class (Daniel, 2007; Wigglesworth, 2017; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020). This study applied the SLE theoretical framework in a slightly different capacity – to explore the experience of obtaining an undergraduate degree from an OAP, particularly as that experience relates to participants current careers.

Reflection in SLE. The SLE theoretical framework is relevant for understanding how experiences impact individuals' lives, asking the question, 'what experiences did individuals have that created lasting impact on their lives?' This lasting impact could refer to beliefs, preferences, understandings, and worldviews that are held by an individual today as a result of an experience (Chawla, 1998). This is accomplished through reflection. The accuracy of memory is outside of the scope of SLE, and instead of examining memories for lasting accuracy, SLE examines memories for lasting impact. As Neisser (1988) notes, memories of events do not have

to be accurate for the memory to impact the recollector. Notably, the OAPs alumni in this study place a strong emphasis on experiential education and reflection; SLE maps effectively with the emphasis on reflection that alumni participating in this study experienced in undergrad. In the past, SLE participants have alluded to experiences that impacted their careers (Daniel, 2003; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020), yet careers were not explored directly in those surveys. In the next chapter, I will expand on how careers will be highlighted in this SLE research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Utilizing an modified Significant Life Experience (SLE) theoretical framework (Chawla, 1998; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980) and a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), this study aimed to understand the aspects of higher education outdoor academic programs that alumni may attribute to having made an impact on their careers. In the past twenty years, research that seeks to assess if OAPs in higher education have impacted alumni careers has been minimal, with virtually none from the crucial perspective of alumni. Due to the lack of existing data, a convergent mixed methods methodology was well matched to answer the research questions by providing both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A convergent mixed methods approach means that the qualitative and quantitative data were sought simultaneously and brought together to determine where the two data sets “converge and diverge” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 65). The data specifically highlight the perspectives of alumni in relation to their careers. For this study, Daniel et al.’s (2022) SLE survey was modified and used to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then brought together for comparison.

This chapter will share why alumni of three OAPs in the southeast United States is appropriate for answering the research questions. Further, it will cover ethical considerations, data collection methods, and analysis procedures.

Population Selection and Sampling Strategy

The population for this study was alumni from the following outdoor academic undergraduate degree-granting institutions:

- 1) Brevard College: Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education
- 2) Montreat College: Outdoor Recreation Studies

3) Warren Wilson College: Outdoor Leadership

These three schools were selected for their long-standing OAPs. All three programs have been producing graduates for at least 25 years (Canberg & Daniels, 2006), and possess a variety of components inherent to a typical OAP (Brevard College, 2023; Montreat College, 2022; Sugerman, 1999; Taff et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2022; Warren Wilson College, 2022). Until as recently as 2023, each of these OAPs required that its students’ complete coursework in introductory technical skills courses, an academic internship, and a certification in wilderness medicine (Brevard College, 2023; Montreat College, 2022; Warren Wilson College, 2023). Table 1 provides an overview of information about each of the outdoor academic programs selected for this research.

Table 1

Quick Facts about Brevard, Warren Wilson, and Montreat Colleges

	Brevard College	Montreat College	Warren Wilson College
Type of Degree	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Science	Bachelor of Arts
Name of Degree	Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education	Outdoor Recreation Studies	Outdoor Leadership
Year Major Program Was Initiated	1996	1974	1993
Total Number of Program Graduates	373 majors	187 majors	303 majors and minors
Goal Number Respondents	22	22	25
Location	Brevard, North Carolina	Black Mountain, North Carolina	Swannanoa, North Carolina

At the core of this research is alumni recollecting and determining whether their OAP was truly impressionable on their career and essential to their life narrative (Bruner, 1987) so to

participate in this research, alumni must have graduated from their OAP five or more years ago (i.e., prior to or in 2017). Alumni as few as five years out from undergrad may still be working seasonal or entry-level jobs, whereas alumni from as many as 30 years ago may have a different understanding of how their undergraduate program experiences have impacted their professional development. The variability in the length of careers of the respondents provided a wide degree of insights for the study. Alumni who graduated less than five years ago were not included as they might not have had enough life experience post-graduation to determine if their OAP has been salient in their career.

Participant Recruitment Strategy

All alumni who graduated with a bachelor's degree in or prior to 2017 were contacted to participate in the study by the current program coordinator from their respective OAP or a school administrator. Note that while Montreat College's OAP has been graduating students since 1974, so many students graduated prior to the digital age and therefore no email addresses were collected with their records. Instead of aiming to get one response for every year going back to 1974, I sought responses going back to 1996 to match Brevard College's timeline.

The goal in having the program coordinators distribute the survey was that respondents might recognize their alma mater's email domain or a familiar name and be more likely to respond to the survey (Dillman et al., 2014). This method may have led to response bias as alumni with affection for their school or program coordinator may be more likely to go through the effort of filling out the survey, but the benefit of using a ".edu" email address associated with the alumni's alma mater lends credibility to the study.

Alumni were contacted via email five times (Dillman et al., 2014). In addition to email addresses, program coordinators posted the study on Facebook groups, Facebook pages,

Instagram pages, or messaging systems that the alumni might frequent (Dillman et al., 2014). For consistency, each current program coordinator was provided a communication guide that includes scripts for emails and Facebook group posts. See Appendix A for a copy of the Program Coordinator Communications Guide.

Sample Size. The sample was comprised of 130 participants who chose to complete the survey based on their interests, convenience, and availability; this approach is also known as a nonprobability sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Although a nonprobability sampling method is not ideal as it can lead to bias based on the types of people who will elect to fill out a survey, it is the most frequently used sampling technique (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) and appropriate for this study.

The study strived to capture responses from individuals who are in a variety of phases of life. Therefore, the objective was to receive at least one response from one individual for every year that the OAP has existed, similar to the goals of Daniel et al.'s (2022) SLE research. I hoped to receive a combined total of at least 69 responses from alumni (refer to Table 1 for a specific number of goal responses from each institution). In acknowledgement that survey research and contacting alumni could have proven itself to be difficult, it is worth noting that if the goal total of responses was not met, the study would still provide valuable information if there was representation from the majority of graduation years represented.

Ethical Considerations

As Privetera (2020) posits: to avoid ethical concerns, surveys should not be hurtful or harmful to participants, participants should not be coerced or harassed into responding, and the anonymity and/or confidentiality of participants must be treated with the utmost respect and care by researchers; this survey meets those criteria. The survey did not ask participants to state their

names, which further served to protect respondents' anonymity and responses were treated confidentially.

Institutional Review Board Approval

This study required Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. All survey respondents completed an informed consent document (see Appendix B for a copy of this document) and were adults with a college degree which implies all possess comfort with reading and expressing oneself in English. I received IRB approval through Western Carolina University. See Appendix C for a copy of the IRB Application Determination and Appendix D, E, and F for a copy of the Letters of Support provided by the program coordinators at the three institutions.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

I am not a graduate of an OAP, although I took classes within Brevard College's Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education program during my tenure as a student there. As a current employee of the Academic Affairs Office at Brevard College, and as someone who hopes to see OAPs thrive, I am aware of my biases in this research. This will be addressed within the analysis phase with a rigorous coding and inter-coder process to be discussed in the "Data Analysis Procedures for Convergent Mixed Methods" section of this chapter.

Methods

Using an embedded mixed-methods SLE survey, this study generated qualitative and quantitative data to be used together for analysis, leading to a more concrete understanding of the aggregate and individual views of OAP alumni (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Morling, 2018; Privitera, 2020).

Precedent for Data Collection Methods

Daniel et al. (2022) used an SLE survey to contact former North Carolina Outward Bound course participants to learn if the courses were perceived to be life-altering. The SLE survey in this current study was based on the SLE survey employed by Daniel et al. (2022). The three major sections and many of the questions within those sections were adapted for OAP alumni. The goal of each question was modified to seek a narrower scope of answers by asking about impacts on career rather than impacts on life overall. Table 2 provides examples of some of the edited questions.

Table 2

Comparing Daniel et al. (2022) Survey to OAP SLE Survey

Daniel et al. (2022) Survey Question	Corresponding OAP SLE Survey
Did your Outward Bound course make a difference in your life in any way? Please explain why you think it did or did not.	Did your outdoor-related degree program make a difference in your life in any way? If your outdoor-related degree program made a difference in your life, please provide one or more specific examples of how it did so.
A typical Outward Bound course consists of various components (e.g., canoeing, evening debriefing, backpacking, group dynamics, etc.). From which Outward Bound course component(s) did you learn the most? Please briefly describe what you learned.	A typical outdoor-related degree program consists of various components (e.g., internships, outdoor education courses, faculty mentorship, peer interactions, etc.). From which outdoor-related degree program component(s) did you learn the most? Please briefly describe what you learned.
Has your opinion of what your Outward Bound course meant to you changed or remained the same since completing the course? Please explain why you think it has/has not changed.	Has your opinion of what your outdoor-related degree program meant to your career changed or remained the same in the years that followed the completion of your degree? Please explain your answer to the previous question.

Data Collection. The survey was distributed via Qualtrics, an internet survey platform, as it is economical, convenient, and efficient (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Privitera, 2020).

Given the widespread availability of the Internet in our modern age, there were no anticipated barriers to participation. The survey itself was reviewed by an expert panel comprised of OAP alumni and faculty who are affiliated with an OAP, and feedback from the panel was integrated.

The first section of the modified Daniel et al. (2022) SLE survey contained open-ended items. These items aim to ascertain if and how graduation from an OAP has impacted graduates' careers. The survey first asked if there has been an impact to avoid leading the respondents. For example, "Did your outdoor-related program make a difference in your life in any way?" is followed by "Please explain why you think your outdoor-related program did or did not make a difference in your life." Once answered, there was the opportunity for more open-ended items. These inquiries are in sections one and three of the survey and included "Has your opinion of what your outdoor-related degree program meant to your career changed or remained the same in the years that followed the completion of your degree?" and "Do you feel that the skills or knowledge you learned in your outdoor-related degree program are transferable to your current career?"

To understand which components of typical OAPs contain tremendous potential for impact, the second section of the survey asked respondents to rate a variety of traditional programmatic components on a Likert Scale. The Likert Scale contained the columns "not important," "slightly important," "moderately important," "very important," "extremely important," and "not applicable." The categories participants were asked to respond to included "certifications," "faculty mentorship," "job fair," "work study program," "peer mentorship," and "internship" amongst other categories. These categories were selected for their impact on students as suggested in the High Impact Practices literature referenced in Chapter Two, or because of their prevalence in OAP curriculum.

The third section of the survey included a series of questions that revealed concrete information about the type of respondent who answered the questions. Items participants responded to included, “What year did you graduate from your outdoor academic program?” Other questions asked participants to state their ethnicity, gender identity, average annual income, and if they have pursued any additional degrees after obtaining their undergraduate degree. See Appendix G for a complete copy of the modified survey as it was displayed in Qualtrics.

Timeline and Procedures for Data Collection

Upon a successful proposal, the survey was emailed from program coordinators to their corresponding alumni databases. To avoid the program coordinators fielding too many questions, my email was included in the instructions, and potential respondents contacted me directly with any questions or issues they experienced. The survey opened on October 18, 2023 and closed on December 8, 2023, marking the end of the data collection phase and the beginning of the data analysis phase. While the intent was for the different schools to send emails and post on social media, it was challenging to coordinate this effort across multiple academic calendars. Therefore, Table 3 indicates the timeline each school followed for their communications. Refer to Appendix A to review the Program Coordinator Communications Guide.

Table 3

Timeline of OAP Communications with Alumni Database

	Brevard College	Montreat College	Warren Wilson College
Email 1	October 18, 2023	October 18, 2023	October 25, 2023
Email 2	October 26, 2023	October 26, 2023	November 2, 2023
Email 3	November 3, 2023	November 8, 2023	November 9, 2023

Email 4	November 10, 2023	November 20, 2023	November 21, 2023
Email 5	November 22, 2023		
Social Media 1	October 23, 2023 (Instagram & Facebook)	October 20, 2023 (Instagram)	October 20, 2023 (Instagram)
Social Media 2			November 14, 2023 (Instagram)

Data Analysis Procedures for Convergent Mixed Methods

Quantitative Data Analysis

The following process for analyzing quantitative data applied primarily to the second section of the survey that dwelled on impactful components of OAPs and the third section of the survey which focused on demographics. Quantitative responses were analyzed for response frequencies using Google Sheets (Privitera, 2020). This process revealed large-scale trends in the data and allowed for an easy understanding of results. These analyses highlighted if there were certain components of an OAP experience that alumni perceived to be more impactful than others. In the analysis of the second section of the survey, the mean, median, mode, and average were calculated to illuminate trends of which OAP components were perceived by alumni to be impactful. This specifically addressed the second research question: “What components of the undergraduate outdoor academic program are perceived by alumni to be most impactful on graduates' careers?”

The analysis of the third section of the survey identified the respondent demographics, such as average income or how many OAP alumni have gone on to pursue another degree. This information gave context for the data shared in the first and second parts of the survey.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The coding of the qualitative responses followed Creswell & Creswell's (2023) five-step process. First, the data was read and organized, correcting any spelling errors or typos to make it easier to search for specific words within responses in the future. Then, the responses were looked at collectively, to assess what respondents are generally saying about their OAP experience and how it has impacted their career. In that phase, I kept notes in a designated column of the spreadsheet key with information to be analyzed later. Creswell & Creswell's (2023) third step is to code all the data; once this step was complete an intercoder reviewed 20% of the responses aiming for 80% or greater agreement in the codes, to lend credibility to the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saldaña, 2013). The fourth step of the process was to generate a description and themes and the fifth and final step is to represent those descriptions and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The qualitative data primarily served to answer the first question, "What experiences (if any) do alumni perceive as having impacted their careers, and in what ways?" but might serve to support the findings in the "components" section of the survey, answering the research question, "What components of the undergraduate outdoor academic program are perceived by alumni to be most impactful on graduates' careers?"

Comparing the Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The complete qualitative and quantitative data were compared to each other to identify themes present in both data sets, and themes that were only present in one (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Then, a comparison discussion was written to represent the similarities and differences in the two data sets, highlighting quotes and themes from the qualitative questions and response frequencies for the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

With pre-existing studies supporting the professional value of an OAP degree, there remains a need to explore the value of these degrees from the perspective of alumni. Given this

need, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate OAP and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers.

The following section is the manuscript for the *Journal of Outdoor Education, Recreation, and Leadership*. This is in lieu of a traditional chapter four and five of the thesis document. The URL to submission guidelines can be found below using the link <https://js.sgamorepub.com/jorel/about/submissions>. This manuscript is going to be submitted under the Regular Paper category for consideration in a special issue of the *JOREL* focused on “The Outdoor Industry Workforce: Aligning Preparation and Opportunities.” Manuscript length is generally 20-30 double-spaced pages (6,000-9,000 words) including all references, tables, and figures. This manuscript is 8,392 words and 34 pages all inclusive.

CHAPTER FOUR AND FIVE: JOREL JOURNAL MANUSCRIPT

The Life Significance of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs:

Alumni Perspectives

Abstract

Undergraduate outdoor academic programs have existed in the United States of America since the 1970s. These programs necessitate financial support, copious time from students and faculty, access to outdoor spaces, and specialized training for faculty, and so despite a strong academic tradition, these programs are challenging to justify to college administrators. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. To address the gap in the literature, this study utilized a significant life experience theoretical framework and engaged alumni of three longstanding undergraduate outdoor academic programs via an Internet survey. The results indicate that respondents found their undergraduate outdoor academic program to be extremely impactful on their career whether their current work is in the outdoor industry or another field.

Keywords: higher education, outdoor academic program, Significant Life Experience

The Life Significance of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs:

Alumni Perspectives

Outdoor academic programs in higher education assist in training future outdoor industry employees who work in the \$1.1 trillion outdoor recreation economy in the United States of America (Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, 2023). However, even as the industry is booming, outdoor academic program budgets are being reduced and entire programs are being eliminated across higher education (Turner et al., 2022). There is an urgent need to ascertain the value of these degrees to college and university administrators (Seaman et al., 2017). The alumni perspective is critical to increase our understanding of the long-term impacts of studying in and graduating from outdoor academic programs, specifically to understand the ways in which skills and knowledge transfer to careers.

Literature Review

Possessing a variety of names (e.g., “Parks and Recreation Management,” “Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education,” or “Outdoor Program Management” to name a few), outdoor academic programs are located in a variety of colleges (e.g., Health, Education, or Business) across the United States of America (Jostad et al., 2023). For this study, the term outdoor academic program (OAP) refers to any undergraduate degree-granting program that has an outdoor education or outdoor leadership component (Turner et al., 2022). OAPs emphasizing adventure have existed since the 1970s (Guthrie et al., 2012), but in recent years programs are being eliminated by college and university administrations. Indeed, few people know of OAPs or the job opportunities that might be afforded to OAP alumni (Seaman et al., 2017), which may impact college administrator decisions to close these programs..

The State of Higher Education

In a study on higher education student trends over the past 50 years, Eagan et. al. (2016) reported that 86% of students enroll in college to get a better job. Indeed, colleges are aware of this and many have responded by developing programs to assist students in preparing for and pursuing chosen careers. Considering that many potential students are increasingly questioning the value of a college degree given due to the cost, it seems wise for colleges to understand the connection between an undergraduate education and a vibrant, secure career (Gardner, 2023).

Colleges are integrating “High Impact Practices” or HIPs into the design of these career readiness initiatives to assist in the creation of successful programs. HIPs are elements of an undergraduate institution that have been demonstrated to be extremely effective in helping college students develop professionally, through such things as creating ePortfolios, taking career readiness courses, and completing internships (American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). A Gallup-Purdue (2014) survey unveiled what they dubbed to be “The Big Six” college experiences that have been shown to indicate well-being later in life. The Big Six are one type of HIP that schools could target:

- 1) My professors at [Institution] cared about me as a person.
- 2) I had at least one professor at [Institution] who made me excited about learning.
- 3) While attending [Institution], I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
- 4) While attending [Institution], I had a job or internship that allowed me to apply what I learned in the classroom.
- 5) While attending [Institution] I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.

6) I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [Institution].

All of the Big Six criteria emphasize skills and relationships that last beyond college. Further, the final four criteria focus on experiences that may aid students in finding a career. Prioritizing the Big Six criteria could create institutional cultures of prioritizing experiences and transferable skills over the title of a major.

Questioning the Value of Undergraduate Fields

The value of certain degrees over others is a seemingly perpetual topic in higher education. Students may choose a degree that they expect will have a reliable return on investment (ROI) in consideration of the debt many incur to attend college. STEM and business majors attract many students with the understanding that graduates will be able to quickly secure high-income earning jobs (Gallup, 2017). Students see the ROI of these majors as reliable, and college administrator reasoning follows that emphasizing those degrees will attract more students.

Gallup (2017) found that 40% of students with a bachelor's degree would select a different major if they were to go back and do it all over again. Although the study didn't cover the reason(s) so many graduates would be interested in choosing a different major, this research suggests that it is important to teach generalizable and transferable skills in undergraduate coursework to equip students regardless of their career path. In response to this, career readiness initiatives have the goal to teach skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication that can be useful to graduates regardless of their future career.

OAPs are no exception to these trends. Many OAPs market that they teach transferable skills, and alumni will be able to land a job in their field of interest within a year of graduation.

Further, by the inherently experiential curriculum and small class sizes necessary to teach skills-based OAP courses, many OAPs are well-positioned to meet the criteria of the Big Six outlined by Gallup-Purdue (2014).

Why are OAPs Being Cut?

A census completed in 2021 found there were 128 higher education OAPs in the United States (Turner et al., 2022). However, that number is already dwindling; as of October 2023, fifteen OAPs have been eliminated (Bell et al., 2024). OAPs consume a vast amount of time and financial resources compared to other programs found at universities (Potter et al., 2012) in addition to OAPs requiring more face-to-face instruction, smaller class sizes, greater access to outdoor spaces, and more consequential situations (Turner et al., 2022). It is increasingly challenging to justify the resources these programs require to those unfamiliar with the outdoor field, particularly as research supporting the value of graduating from an OAP is lacking. Administrators who are unfamiliar with the outcomes of graduating with an OAP are often the ones making the decision to close programs, and to better inform their decision to close a program, first-hand accounts of the value of an OAP are needed.

Employer and Faculty Perspectives on Professional Impact of OAPs

Administrators could learn the value of OAPs by reviewing the perspective of outdoor industry employers or OAP faculty. Seaman et al. (2017) assessed undergraduate OAP faculty members' and employers' perceived value of a degree from an OAP in a quantitative study of 59 OAPs and 134 companies that would potentially hire graduates of OAPs. Companies selected skills most sought when hiring (e.g., leadership, technical skills, etc) and when the research team compared the skills companies sought after with the skills OAPs felt they provided, the traits

selected by both were in alignment. This led the researchers to confirm there is value graduating from an OAP.

Maningas & Simpson (2003) found that that many staffing managers have a strong desire for prospective employees to possess a Wilderness First Responder and considerable interpersonal skills. The same study shows that 55% of outdoor industry hiring managers sought employees who had a college-level education. A clear path for students to obtain wilderness medical training, interpersonal skills, and a college degree is through an OAP (Sugerman, 1999).

Professional Value as Perceived by Alumni

A study examining alumni perspectives on their OAP experiences comes from the United Kingdom, where Prince (2005) found many alumni were working in a field they perceived to be indirectly or not related at all to their undergraduate studies, and many experienced high levels of job satisfaction despite earning low salaries. Prince (2005) found that there are benefits to graduating from an OAP, with alumni believing their degree taught them important and transferable skills like problem solving, teamwork, communication, and self-motivation.

Articulating the Value of a Degree

OAPs need information to continue to secure institutional support and explain the value of their degree to prospective students. Studies from Maningas & Simpson (2003) and Taff (2016) demonstrate the professional value of a degree from an OAP as employers and faculty understand it. However, there remains a dearth of research on the alumni themselves. Therefore, to uncover first-hand perspectives on OAPs and their career relevance, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate OAP and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. Answering the research questions with a Significant

Life Experience framework provides valuable insights as to the value of OAPS and their career-related relevance to college administrators.

Significant Life Experience Theoretical Framework

This research utilized a modified Significant Life Experience (SLE) theoretical framework (Chawla, 1998; Daniel, 2003; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980). SLE is dependent on memory and reflection to be salient, with most SLE studies conducted on how environmental experiences related to pro-environmental behaviors (Chawla, 1998; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980). SLE has been applied in outdoor field research in relation to specific courses, such as participation in an Outward Bound or OAP course (Daniel, 2007; Daniel et al., 2022; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020). This study applied an SLE theoretical framework in a slightly different capacity – to explore the experience of obtaining an undergraduate degree from an OAP, particularly as that experience relates to participants’ current careers. In the past, SLE participants have alluded to experiences that impacted their careers (Daniel, 2003; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2020), yet careers were not explored directly in those surveys.

SLE is an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding how experiences impact individuals’ lives, asking the question, ‘what experiences did individuals have that created lasting impact on their lives?’ This lasting impact could refer to beliefs, preferences, understandings, and worldviews that are held by an individual today as a result of an experience (Chawla, 1998). This is accomplished through reflection. Notably, the OAPs in this study place a strong emphasis on experiential education and reflection; an SLE theoretical framework mirrors the emphasis on reflection that OAP alumni likely experienced in college. Accuracy of memory (or verity of memory) is outside of the scope of SLE as instead of examining memories for lasting accuracy, SLE examines memories for lasting impact (or utility of memory) (Neisser,

1988). This distinction is important because, as Neisser (1988) notes, memories of events do not have to be accurate for the memory to impact the recollector and for the event to be essential within their life narrative.

Methods

Utilizing a modified Significant Life Experience (SLE) theoretical framework (Chawla, 1998; Daniel, 2003; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980) and a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), this study aimed to understand the aspects of higher education OAPs that alumni may attribute to having an impact on their careers. In the past twenty years, research that seeks to assess if OAPs in higher education have impacted alumni careers has been minimal, with virtually none from the perspective of alumni. A convergent mixed methods methodology was employed to answer the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Daniel et al.'s (2022) SLE survey was modified and used to collect quantitative and qualitative data with the intent of creating a more concrete understanding of the aggregate and individual views of OAP alumni (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Privitera, 2020).

Site Selection and Sampling Strategy

The population for this study was alumni from the following outdoor academic undergraduate degree-granting institutions:

1. Brevard College: Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education
2. Montreat College: Outdoor Recreation Studies
3. Warren Wilson College: Outdoor Leadership

These schools were selected for their long-standing OAPs. All three programs have been producing graduates for at least 25 years (Canberg & Daniels, 2006) and possess a variety of components inherent to a typical OAP (Sugerman, 1999; Taff et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2022).

Until 2022, each of these OAPs required that its students complete coursework in introductory technical skills courses, an academic internship, and a certification in wilderness medicine (Brevard College, 2023; Montreat College, 2022; Warren Wilson College, 2022). Table 1 provides an overview of information about each of the outdoor academic programs selected for this research.

Table 1

Quick Facts about Brevard, Warren Wilson, and Montreat Colleges

	Brevard College	Montreat College	Warren Wilson College
Type of Degree	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Science	Bachelor of Arts
Name of Degree	Wilderness Leadership & Experiential Education	Outdoor Recreation Studies	Outdoor Leadership
Year Major Program Was Initiated	1996	1974	1993
Total Number of Program Graduates	373 majors	187 majors	303 majors and minors
Goal Number Respondents	22	22	25

Precedent for Data Collection

At the core of this research was alumni recollecting and determining whether their OAP was truly influential on their career and essential to their life narrative, as determined by the alumnus themselves (Bruner, 1987). Therefore, to participate in this research, alumni had to have graduated from their OAP five or more years ago (i.e., prior to or in 2017). With the intent of capturing responses from individuals who were in a variety of phases of life, the objective was to receive at least one response from one individual for every year the OAP has existed, similar to the goals of Daniel et al.’s (2022) study.

This research used the survey from Daniel et al.'s (2022) study, but it was modified in a few crucial ways. The survey in this study differed in that it was adapted for OAP alumni and sought a narrower scope of answers by asking about impacts on career rather than impacts on life overall. The survey was distributed via Qualtrics and was first reviewed by an expert panel comprised of OAP alumni and faculty from the three schools.

Participant Recruitment Strategy

All alumni who graduated with a bachelor's degree during the designated time span were contacted by a representative from their alma mater (typically the current OAP coordinator) and invited to participate in the study. Note that while Montreat College's OAP has been graduating students since 1974, many students graduated prior to the digital age and therefore no email addresses were collected with their records. Instead of aiming to get one response for every year going back to 1974, this study sought responses going back to 1996 to match Brevard College's timeline.

The goal in having the program coordinators or another college representative distribute the survey was that respondents might recognize their alma mater's email domain and be more likely to respond to the survey (Dillman et al., 2014). This method may have led to sampling bias as alumni with affection for their school or program coordinator may be more likely to go through the effort of filling out the survey (Privitera, 2020). Alumni were intended to be contacted via email five times and program coordinators were instructed to post the study on their program's social media twice (Dillman et al., 2014). For consistency, each current program coordinator was provided a communication guide that included scripts for emails and social media posts. While the intention was for the schools to send emails and post on social media on the same day, it was challenging to coordinate this effort across multiple academic calendars.

Therefore, Table 2 indicates the timeline the different schools followed for each of their communications.

Table 2

Timeline of OAP Communications with Alumni Database

	Brevard College	Montreat College	Warren Wilson College
Email 1	October 18, 2023	October 18, 2023	October 25, 2023
Email 2	October 26, 2023	October 26, 2023	November 2, 2023
Email 3	November 3, 2023	November 8, 2023	November 9, 2023
Email 4	November 10, 2023	November 20, 2023	November 21, 2023
Email 5	November 22, 2023		
Social Media 1	October 23, 2023 (Instagram & Facebook)	October 20, 2023 (Instagram)	October 20, 2023 (Instagram)
Social Media 2			November 14, 2023 (Instagram)

Data Analysis

The quantitative response analysis generated response frequencies to reveal large-scale trends in the data (Privitera, 2020). These frequencies illuminated components of the OAP experience that alumni perceived to be impactful and identified respondent demographics.

The qualitative analysis followed Creswell & Creswell’s (2023) five-step coding process. First, the data was read and organized and secondly looked at collectively to assess what respondents are generally saying about their OAP experience and how it has impacted their career. The third step was to code all the data; once this step was complete an intercoder reviewed 20% of the responses aiming for 80% or greater agreement in the codes, to lend credibility to the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this case, when the intercoder

process was completed, there was a minimum of 83% agreement for each of the five questions coded which met the criteria of Creswell & Creswell’s (2023) coding process. Then, following the recommendations of Creswell & Creswell (2023), the fourth step of the process was to generate a description and emergent themes. The frequency of themes was determined by adding up the total number of codes assigned and dividing that total by the number of codes that were a part of a theme. Since individual responses might contain multiple codes, the *n* of codes as a part of a theme or question is higher than the *n* of responses. The fifth and final step was to represent those descriptions and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). For this study, the themes are presented with representative quotes.

Once the qualitative and quantitative data analysis concluded, the two data sets were brought together for comparison (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)

Results

The survey received a total of 130 responses. Brevard College and Warren Wilson College received responses for nearly all the years this study sought responses. Montreat College also received a good distribution of responses, received at least one response every four years. Table 3 shows the distribution of survey responses organized by alma mater.

Table 3

Participants by Year Graduated

Year Graduated	Brevard College	Montreat College	Warren Wilson College
1993		2	
1994		1	
1995			
1996		2	
1997			4

1998			2
1999	1	3	2
2000	2		4
2001	1	2	1
2002	1		5
2003	2	1	2
2004	3		1
2005	2	2	1
2006	1		3
2007			3
2008	2		5
2009	2	2	3
2010	3	3	1
2011	4	4	3
2012	3	2	1
2013	4	3	3
2014	4	3	1
2015	1	2	3
2016	2	3	3
2017	3		2
Year Unknown		1	
TOTAL	Brevard College Respondents	Montreat College Respondents	Warren Wilson College Respondents
	41	36	53

48% ($n=60$) of the respondents identified as men, 40% ($n=50$) as women, and the remaining alumni either did not share or their gender did not fit within the confines of “man” or “woman”. The respondents have careers in social work, academia, wilderness therapy, outdoor retail, and library services and are tradespeople, firefighters, military personnel, teachers, guides

and entrepreneurs. 45% ($n=59$) have earned or are earning additional degrees in topics ranging from Accounting to Divinity, Counseling to Multimedia Journalism. 94% ($n=116$) of respondents identify as White/Caucasian. Although all respondents attended college in the southeast, they have spread out to a variety of states including Alaska, Michigan, California, Washington, Colorado, and internationally in New Zealand and South Korea. 40% ($n=50$) still call North Carolina home.

When asked if the skills or knowledge learned in their OAP was transferable to their current career, 89% ($n=110$) of respondents said yes, 9% ($n=11$) said maybe, and 2% ($n=3$) said no. Of the 97% ($n=120$) of graduates who are employed, 42% ($n=50$) believe their career to be in the outdoor field. Therefore, it seems that the alumni in this study would agree with faculty who assert there is career transferability and value in OAP learnings (Seaman et al., 2017). In fact, only 7% ($n=9$) of respondents say they would not recommend earning a degree from an OAP to someone who was interested in working in the outdoor field. Those 7% ($n=9$) often said a degree in another field might give that student more options should they wish to leave the outdoor field or that an undergraduate degree isn't necessary to work in the industry; that is: someone interested in working in the outdoor field would be better off gaining certifications and experience to start work immediately.

The following sections will explore the themes that emerged from the following open response survey questions: a) What were your most important takeaways or learnings (if any) from your [OAP]?, b) If your [OAP] made a difference in your life, please provide one or more specific examples of how it did so., c) A typical [OAP] consists of various components (e.g., internships, outdoor education courses, field (out-of-traditional classroom) experiences, faculty mentorship, peer interactions, etc.). From which [OAP] component(s) did you learn the most?

Please briefly describe what you learned., and d) Please explain your answer to [Has your opinion of what your [OAP] meant to your career changed or remained the same in the years that followed the completion of your degree?]. For each question, the four emergent themes with the greatest quantity of responses will be reported.

Important Takeaways

When asked about important takeaways from their OAP, participant responses were categorized into six emergent themes: a) interpersonal skills, b) technical skill improvement, c) intrapersonal awareness, and d) non-curricular features of OAPs. Refer to Table 4 for the frequency of each theme.

Table 4

Important Takeaways Themes

	Total	Frequency
Interpersonal Skills	n=130	37%
Technical Skills Improvement	n=89	35%
Intrapersonal Awareness	n=49	14%
Non-Curricular Features of OAPs	n=32	1%

Interpersonal Skills

Participants often noted their value for interpersonal skills increased while enrolled in their OAP or that their ability to engage with others increased. This theme includes references to teamwork, feedback, leadership, group dynamics, and the importance of relationships. One graduate shared their takeaway was, “The ability to work with a wide spectrum of people in sometimes challenging ways and environments (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2006).”

Another respondent said, “,, connecting with people where they are is the first step to connecting them to the outdoors, either in their home or elsewhere (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2009).”

Technical Skill Improvement

Technical skill improvement was also a key takeaway for many participants. A Warren Wilson graduate shared, “I felt more confident in outdoor recreation situations like backpacking rock climbing, canoeing, etc. (2002),” and a Brevard College alumnus responded that they learned “how to keep myself and others out of danger in the wilderness (2003).”

Intrapersonal Awareness

In addition to the growth in their awareness and competence for working with others and their technical skills, respondents also noticed personal growth and an increase in self-awareness, saying “I learned practical skills that gave me self-confidence and taught me persistence and resilience (Montreat College alumnus, 2011),” and “confidence in my skills, and humility in face of the challenges that come from wilderness travel (Montreat College alumnus, 2014).”

Non-Curricular Features of OAPs

Many respondents found their takeaways related to the non-curricular features of their OAP. This theme includes responses which expressed gratitude to faculty for their mentorship, the benefit of the outdoor experiences they had in college, or their understanding that having experiential teaching methods applied in their courses was beneficial for their growth or comprehension of the content. In gratitude to a faculty member, one respondent said, “no real world job assignment will hold you to a higher standard than one by Ken Kalisch (Montreat College alumnus, 2016).”

Made a Difference

When asked if their OAP made a difference in their life, 95% ($n=124$) of respondents replied that it had. Compared to other life experiences, 8% ($n=10$) of respondents said that OAP experience was “most influential” on their career while 60% ($n=79$) of respondents said their OAP was “very influential.”

The survey followed this question by requesting that respondents share an example of how their OAP had made a difference. Six themes emerged from these responses: a) skills learned, b) career relevance, c) transformational nature of OAPs, and d) relationships with people.

Table 5

Made a Difference Themes

	Total	Frequency
Skills Learned	$n=162$	48%
Career Relevance	$n=110$	32%
Transformational Nature of OAPs	$n=18$.5%
Relationship with People	$n=18$.5%

Skills Learned

Many respondents mentioned specific skills related to leadership, education, facilitation, program development and administration, or outdoor competencies. Other skills included in this theme are traits that respondents learned or developed in their OAP, like resilience, adaptability, or courage. These were grouped in a theme titled “skills learned” and are captured in a quote from this respondent,

I think being an outdoor leadership major gave me the opportunity to develop leadership, planning and people skills that have transferred to jobs and situations

beyond the outdoor field. Being flexible, adaptable, and able to lead groups or teams has been extremely valuable (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2017).

Career Relevance

Career relevance emerged as a theme after many respondents referenced the transferability their OAP learnings to their current career, the beneficial networking opportunities they experienced in undergrad, or ways in which their OAP experience clarified their career path.

Some people in the industry will tell you that experience working is more valuable than an [outdoor leadership] education, but (anecdotally) when I look around at the peers I graduated with, those still in the industry tend to have worked their way up into higher positions. I think my degree gave me a certain level of professionalism coming into the industry which directly translated into being able to apply the work experience I gained more effectively (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2008).

A Brevard College alumnus also shared, “I have worked as a kayak tour guide, a combat engineer, and now as a wildland firefighter. I have used and still use almost daily many of the skills [acquired] in my degree program (2003).”

Transformational Nature of OAPs

Some respondents found the value of their OAP was in its transformational nature. Some alumni shared they became a “better person” because of their OAP, letting go of bad habits or bad relationships. One alumnus said, “I got healthier as a person: physically, mentally, and emotionally (Brevard College alumnus, 2012)” and another said, “Most importantly, the person I became within the program was kinder and gentler than the [person] who entered. And I first

began viewing myself more as a leader and less as a loner within the program (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 1997).”

Relationships with People

Other respondents indicated the value of their OAP was that it created beneficial relationships with people, including lasting friendships with faculty and classmates, or created spaces for the respondents to have impactful experiences with their family. Two respondents even mentioned they met their life partner in their OAP. One Montreat College alumnus spoke to the lasting friendships developed in an OAP: “I had a great time, made lifelong friends, had wonderful instructors that invested in me and became mentors (2011).

Educative Components

To answer the second research question of which components are perceived to be most impactful on alumni’s careers, a Likert scale was used to rank components, and an open-ended question was asked to determine what was learned from the most impactful program components. Table 6 is organized with components in descending order based on the highest combined rankings of “extremely important” and “very important.”

Table 6

Importance of OAP Components

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not Important	Not Applicable
Faculty Mentorship	54% (n=70)	26% (n=34)	10% (n=13)	4% (n=5)	3% (n=3)	5% (n=6)
Peer Friendship	45% (n=59)	29% (n=38)	17% (n=22)	7% (n=9)	2% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
Exposure to New Outdoor Activities	45% (n=59)	27% (n=35)	21% (n=28)	3% (n=4)	1% (n=1)	3% (n=4)
Certifications	43% (n=57)	28% (n=36)	19% (n=25)	5% (n=6)	2% (n=2)	4% (n=5)

Internship	37% (n=48)	34% (n=44)	12% (n=15)	5% (n=7)	3% (n=4)	10% (n=13)
OAP Curriculum	26% (n=34)	42% (n=55)	23% (n=30)	5% (n=6)	3% (n=4)	2% (n=2)
Immersion Semester	36% (n=47)	14% (n=18)	5% (n=6)	2% (n=2)	1% (n=1)	44% (n=57)
"Discovery" or North Carolina Outward Bound Course	30% (n=39)	17% (n=22)	8% (n=11)	3% (n=4)	3% (n=4)	39% (n=51)
Practicum	19% (n=25)	25% (n=33)	28% (n=32)	12% (n=15)	4% (n=5)	16% (n=21)
Work Study Program	25% (n=33)	14% (n=18)	10% (n=13)	8% (n=10)	4% (n=5)	40% (n=52)
Networking Opportunities	12% (n=16)	24% (n=32)	27% (n=35)	15% (n=20)	3% (n=4)	18% (n=24)
Peer Mentorship	12% (n=16)	23% (n=30)	28% (n=37)	12% (n=15)	3% (n=4)	22% (n=29)
Outing Club	11% (n=14)	17% (n=22)	18% (n=23)	13% (n=17)	8% (n=10)	34% (n=45)
Teaching Assistantship	16% (n=21)	12% (n=15)	8% (n=11)	3% (n=4)	7% (n=9)	54% (n=71)
Program Alumni	9% (n=12)	13% (n=17)	24% (n=32)	19% (n=25)	15% (n=19)	21% (n=27)
Conference(s)	3% (n=4)	27% (n=22)	25% (n=33)	21% (n=27)	8% (n=11)	26% (n=34)
International Travel with OAP	11% (n=14)	7% (n=9)	4% (n=5)	2% (n=3)	11% (n=8)	70% (n=92)
Job Fair(s)	2% (n=2)	12% (n=15)	22% (n=29)	21% (n=28)	13% (n=17)	31% (n=40)
Other Clubs	4% (n=5)	8% (n=11)	20% (n=26)	13% (n=17)	10% (n=13)	45% (n=59)

The findings suggest that relationships with faculty and peers, outdoor pursuits, certifications, and internships have been crucial to the careers of the respondents. However, these are relatively universal categories across OAP curricula, and therefore relatively few respondents stated any of those were not applicable; there are a larger number of alumni who can provide an insightful response on the impact of those categories. The opposite is true as well: international travel with OAP, job fair(s), and clubs are ranked as some of the least impactful components, but when adjusted to remove the “not applicable” respondents from the total percentage, the perceived impact increases noticeably. For example, 38% ($n=14$) of the 27 respondents who experienced international travel found that experience to be “extremely impactful.” While this ranking system cannot be a blueprint for the perfect OAP experience, it can provide insight into which components have had a lasting impact on participants.

Evolution of Opinion of OAP

When asked if their opinion of their OAP had changed or remained the same post-grad, 49% ($n=64$) said their opinion had changed a little, 26% ($n=34$) said it had changed a lot, 22% ($n=29$) said it had remained the same, and 3% ($n=4$) said they were unsure. Four themes emerged from the following question: “Please explain your answer to ‘Has your opinion of what your [OAP] meant to your career changed or remained the same in the years that followed the completion of your degree?’” These four themes are a) career outcomes, b) gratitude for OAP, c) degree critique, and d) financial burden.

Table 7

Evolution of Opinion of OAP Themes

	Total	Frequency
Career Outcomes	$n=80$	39%

Gratitude for OAP	<i>n</i> =67	32%
Degree Critique	<i>n</i> =28	14%
Financial Burden	<i>n</i> =18	1%

Career Outcomes

Respondents’ understanding of how their OAP related to their career often evolved over the years, with many learning the degree was more transferable than they had understood it to be in college or that the network they developed in college was beneficial beyond their time in undergrad. A Warren Wilson College alumnus shared, “because the program focuses so much on group process, debriefs, and experiential education, its applications to the modern business world are ubiquitous (2001).” Another respondent captured this idea by saying:

After meeting so many people in education, I am grateful that I took a different path and did not graduate from a traditional education path first. The fact that the methods and philosophies discussed in my undergraduate courses could adapt to so many situations meant that I was able to think on my feet easily and adapt to any situation (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2003),

Gratitude for OAP

Many respondents expressed gratitude for their OAP, and noticed their gratitude increased over time in the years since they graduated. While some noted their appreciation for interpersonal skills increased, for others this was a more general statement.

I don't think I could have realized how useful the entirety of my [Outdoor Leadership] education was, from how to teach to how to lead to understanding

groups to running a business. I am still surprised at how valuable my degree was (Warren Wilson College alumnus, 2000).

Degree Critiques

Some respondents found that their appreciation for the degree lessened or was challenged over time. A handful of respondents reached the conclusion that a degree was not necessary to work in the outdoor field while others found their OAP curriculum lacking, stating they wished they had taken more business classes before they left school. One alumnus said, “I have benefited more from other experiences as I’ve gotten further removed from college (Montreat alumnus, 2001),” and an alumnus who guides multi-day trips stated, “I became more sure that I could have had the career I’ve had with just about any degree (Warren Wilson, 2001).”

Financial Burden of Degree or Field

Although the financial burden associated with earning a bachelor’s degree is not unique to OAPs, it is still worth noting that many alumni mentioned the cost of the degree was a challenge for them. Some alumni expressed dismay with the price tag associated with the degree, as one Brevard College graduate captures:

My change in opinion is more about undergraduate studies in general as opposed to outdoor specific education. Through working with many people- some in high levels/management/leadership that did not have degrees in the field/didn't have degrees at all, I've seen that higher education is not nearly as "essential" as my guidance [counselors] made it seem to be. I've known many people who are working in jobs in or out of the outdoors industry, that do not require a degree, and many who are working outside the industry who are still reeling from the massive amounts of student debt (Brevard College alumnus, 2009).

Other respondents articulated their financial frustrations centered on the standard compensation standards in the outdoor industry,

The outdoor profession needs to work really hard to increase the pay ranges for students seeking these degrees. I don't think it is acceptable to pay someone who invested in a 4-year degree a non-living wage (Brevard College alumnus, 2000).

In alignment with convergent mixed methods research, it is important to conclude by emphasizing the importance of reading all of the qualitative and quantitative data within the context of each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). As one respondent eloquently expresses, the nature of an OAP might be that the sum is greater than its individual parts, so in moving towards the discussion, this study commits to looking at the individual questions as part of the collective.

You can't isolate just one component because the value is the classic "the sum is greater than the parts." It was the mentorship that happened alongside peer interactions in an outdoor setting pursuing adventure sports as well as introspective betterment, etc. None of these components would have been much good without the inclusion of the other components (Montreat College alumnus, 2009).

Discussion

This study and its findings bolster the existing OAP literature, and support the findings of previous studies on perspectives of OAP faculty and outdoor industry employers (Bell et al., 2017; Prince, 2005; Seaman et al., 2017). Prince (2005) found that OAP alumni often do not work in a field they believe to be related to their undergraduate degree, as is true for the respondents in the current study. Also similar to Prince's (2005) research, the OAP graduates in this study believed teamwork, leadership, adaptability, communication, and problem solving

were all critical skills they developed while in school, which are also skills Seaman et al. (2017) found to be valued by outdoor industry employers.

The current study's alumni believe their OAP trained them in the areas that outdoor employers desire in their staff. Alumni repeatedly indicated their leadership skills grew while completing their undergraduate degree; therefore, OAP alumni could be strong candidates at the companies Seaman et al. (2017) surveyed, as 87% of companies believed leadership skills to be the most desirable quality when hiring. Similarly, alumni found certifications to be the fourth most important component of their OAPs agreeing with Seaman et al.'s (2017) findings that organizations believe national-level certifications are a minimum credential for hiring staff. Although the alumni in the current study expressed a desire for greater business skill development, Seaman et al. (2017) found that outdoor employers favor logistical skills over business skills when hiring for managerial positions; perhaps the lack of business skills taught in OAPs does not disadvantage OAP alumni as much as they believe.

Respondents also shared their appreciation for interpersonal skills grew increasingly following their graduation. Maningas & Simpson (2003) acknowledge that hiring managers at outdoor companies hire for interpersonal skills over specific technical skills; OAP alumni seem well suited to meet that need. However, specific alumni shared they found their technical skills extremely relevant in their workplace. For example, a naval officer stated an Advanced Navigation course was a "cornerstone" in his profession (Brevard College alumnus, 2013) and a flight medic shared their rappelling skills were crucial in their career (Montreat College alumnus, 1993).

While the previous work on the Big Six (Gallup-Purdue, 2014) did not guide this study, the connections between this study's findings and the Big Six are notable. The first three criteria

of the Big Six include the student's relationship with faculty, which connects to the themes of "Non-Curricular Features of OAP" and "Relationships with People." The development of the skills alumni value would not be possible without the dedication of faculty and the ability to put their skills into practice, so unsurprisingly faculty mentorship and internships were viewed as extremely impactful by the respondents indicating that these OAPs accomplish three out of six of the Big Six (Gallup-Purdue, 2014). Criteria four ("While attending [Institution] I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.") is often met by the OAPs as well, accomplished by the Intensive Field Based experiences (e.g., Immersion, Discovery, North Carolina Outward Bound School course, Voice of the Rivers) and the Capstone projects offered in courses such as Program Planning and Design at Warren Wilson or Risk Management at Brevard College. Criteria five of the Big Six ("While attending [Institution], I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning outside of the classroom.") was achieved too, as up until 2022 the three schools included an academic internship as a part of their graduation requirements. To support this criterion, when the alumni in this survey responded to a Likert scale of OAP components that have been impactful on their career, internships were ranked as the fourth most impactful component (refer to Table 6 for more information). The final component of the Big Six corresponds with students being extremely active in clubs or other organizations while in school (Gallup-Purdue, 2014). Most institutions leave the involvement of the student in co-curricular activities up to the student's prerogative. However, per the Likert scale responses, most students did not find their extracurricular or co-curricular activities like Outing Clubs, other clubs, or volunteering, to be impactful on their career. This does not necessarily mean that the students weren't extremely active per Big Six's definition (Gallup-Purdue, 2014), but it does appear that extracurricular or co-curricular activities might have been

the “weakest link” for these OAP alumni. Therefore, OAP faculty might investigate ways to further encourage students to engage in or create fulfilling relationships with organizations and activities beyond the requirements of the degree program.

Concern over the ROI of an undergraduate degree is as true for the OAP alumni in the current study as Gallup (2017; 2018a; 2018b) has found in national studies. Many survey respondents in the current study expressed frustration with the cost of their undergraduate degree. It is possible this burden doesn’t belong to OAPs alone to solve as some participants believed it is up to the outdoor industry to increase its compensations standards.

Limitations

One notable limitation to this study lies in the survey distribution method; the individual program coordinators distributed the survey in hopes of increasing the quantity of responses yet this method may have led to response bias as alumni with affection (or intense disdain) for their school or program coordinator may be more likely to go through the effort of filling out the survey. Additionally, many of the earliest OAP graduates might not have had email addresses or may have switched email addresses after they graduated, which has likely led to limitations in distributing the survey. Finally, a question that may be troubling is the findings of pertains to “Do you consider your current job to be in the outdoor field?” The phrasing of this question may have confused respondents who interpreted “field” as in the physical place where some work rather than as a synonym for “industry.”

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought responses from alumni who graduated from the OAPs at three private, liberal arts institutions in the southeast with each school’s undergraduate student body comprised of no more than 1,000 students. The small size of these institutions was reported as a benefit

from the respondents in this study because alumni perceived they were recipients of bountiful attention and personalized opportunities from their faculty. However, per Bell et al. (2024) only 33% of OAPS are housed at institutions with fewer than 2,999 students. Therefore, there is a need to explore perceptions belonging to OAP alumni from institutions that vary geographically as well as at larger schools. Additionally, only 32% of OAPs can be found at private institutions (Bell et al., 2024). Again, a public school's alumni might offer different perspectives than the alumni at these three, private liberal arts institutions.

While outside the scope of this study, it could be valuable for other higher education programs to apply an SLE theoretical framework to explore the impact of their programs on graduates' careers. Of particular interest might be programs that are inherently experiential and meet several of the Big Six criteria by nature of their curriculum (Gallup-Purdue, 2014). For example, arts programs such as Theatre often involve significant time with faculty mentors working on multiple semester-long projects.

Finally, a longer-term perspective on OAPs is missing given the lack of email addresses for Montreat alumni who graduated before 1993. A study surveying alumni who graduated from an OAP before 1993 might offer additional perspectives.

Recommendations for OAP Faculty and Administrators

Based on this study and its results, higher education administrators and OAP faculty should consider the following recommendations in order to increase the relevance of their OAP curriculum:

- Integrate more opportunities for certifications into course curriculum;
- Create more opportunities for students to explore business courses. This could look like encouraging students to double-major or minor in business, reminding students they have

the option to pursue an MBA post-grad, offering business courses as electives, or offering a degree that integrates OAP curriculum and Business curriculum;

- Require or strongly encourage internships as a part of OAP curriculum;
- Develop strong relationships with businesses and organizations so students have fulfilling internship options; and
- Offer a course specifically for students to learn about career paths and gain a realistic understanding of the potential financial implications of a career in the outdoor industry.

This study contributes to existing literature by exploring the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. Respondents confirmed their OAP degree made an impact on life generally, as well as specifically on their career. The findings of this study add to our understanding of the specific value gained by participating in an OAP since virtually none of the previously existing literature examined OAPs through the lens of alumni retrospectively. College administrators can utilize this research as they consider the value of OAPs and as higher education continues to explore the significance of undergraduate degrees. Other researchers may replicate this study at different OAPs or in other undergraduate degree areas to assess the career-impact of graduation from specific programs.

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Appendix A: Program Coordinator Communications Guide

Program Coordinator Communication Guide

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Program coordinators, please note that text written in orange in the scripts is meant to be edited to be specific to your outdoor academic program.

First Email Contact

To be sent on: 10/16/2023 (Or, the day Institutional Review Board approval is received, post-thesis proposal)

Dear [Program Name] Alumni:

I am the Program Coordinator of [College Name]'s [Program Name] program. As an alumnus of this program, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. I am sharing this study on behalf of Abigail Fuesler, a graduate student at Western Carolina university, and your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey below, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

Follow this [link to the survey](https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW) or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the study in general, reach out to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-46-43736.

Sincerely,

[Program Coordinator email signature]

Second Email Contact

To be sent on: 10/24/23

Dear [Major Name] Alumni:

Last week, you received an email stating that as an alumnus of [College Name]'s [Program Name] program, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. It is important that you complete the survey because your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey below, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

Follow this [link to the survey](#) or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the study in general, reach out to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-46-43736.

Sincerely,

[Program Coordinator email signature]

Third Email Contact

To be sent on: 11/1/2023

Dear [Major Name] Alumni:

Two weeks ago, you received an email stating that as an alumnus of [College Name]'s [Program Name] program, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. It is important that you complete the survey because your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey below, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

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If you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the study in general, reach out to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-46-43736.

Sincerely,

2 - Program Coordinator Communication Guide

[Program Coordinator email signature]

Fourth Email Contact

To be sent on: 11/8/2023

Dear [Major Name] Alumni:

As an alumnus of [College Name]'s [Program Name] program, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. I am sharing this study on behalf of Abigail Fuesler, a graduate student at Western Carolina university, and your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey below, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

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https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the study in general, reach out to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-46-43736.

Sincerely,

[Program Coordinator email signature]

Fifth Email Contact

To be sent on: 11/20/2023

Dear [Major Name] Alumni:

As an alumnus of [College Name]'s [Program Name] program, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. I am sharing this study on behalf of Abigail Fuesler, a graduate student at Western Carolina university, and your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for

you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey below, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

Follow this [link to the survey](https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW) or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW
If you have any questions or concerns about the survey or the study in general, reach out to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-46-43736.

Sincerely,

[Program Coordinator email signature]

First Social Media Post

To be posted on: 10/19/2023

Bull horn emoji Calling [Program Name] alumni! If you from [Program Abbreviation] graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2017 or earlier, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. We are sharing this study on behalf of Abigail Fuesler, a graduate student at Western Carolina university, and your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

Your involvement in this research involves answering survey questions about your experiences in [Program Name] and your career. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

When you click on the link to the survey, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it.

** For Instagram posts only, post to your grid with a photo of alumni from your program. Once the post is shared, then, share it to your "story," tap the photo so that the start of the caption of the post shows up with a bit of text at the bottom, and edit the story so that you can add a direct link to the survey

*** For Facebook, copy and paste the link into the post. For Instagram, paste the link into the "website" spot in the account's bio, and insert the following text into the end of the post: "Follow the link in the bio to participate."

https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW

Second Social Media Post

To be posted on: 11/13/2023

Hey [Program Name] alumni, this is a reminder that if you [Program Abbreviation] graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2017 or earlier, you are invited to participate in a research study on the significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program and if those experiences impacted graduates' careers. Your response will contribute to our program's understanding of the contributions it may make to alumni's careers.

When you click on the link to the survey, you will be asked to read the study consent form and choose to complete the survey or to opt out of completing it. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started.

** For Instagram posts only, post to your grid with a photo of alumni from your program. Once the post is shared, then, share it to your "story," tap the photo so that the start of the caption of the post shows up with a bit of text at the bottom, and edit the story so that you can add a direct link to the survey

*** For Facebook, copy and paste the link into the post. For Instagram, paste the link into the "website" spot in the account's bio, and insert the following text into the end of the post: "Follow the link in the bio to participate."

https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebNokUNW85WB4CW

Guidance for Talking to Alumni In-Person

It is appropriate to discuss the survey with members of the population that you meet in person. Please reference the information that is shared via email and social media, to make sure that the same information is being conveyed to the alumni. If alumni have any questions continue to direct them to Abigail Fuesler, at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu or 805-464-3736.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Western Carolina University Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

Below is the informed assent information which will be presented to the student through a WCU/Qualtrics survey. By clicking a button labeled [I consent, begin survey.] at the end of the form, the student will indicate their consent.

Project Title: The Value of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs: An Exploration of Alumni Experiences

This study is being conducted by:

Abigail Fuesler
Graduate Candidate
Experiential and Outdoor Education
Western Carolina University

Andrew J. Bobilya Ph. D.
Professor and Program Director of Experiential and Outdoor Education
Western Carolina University

Description and Purpose of the Research: This study seeks responses from alumni who graduated from the four-year outdoor-related academic programs (e.g. outdoor education, outdoor recreation, outdoor leadership, wilderness leadership and experiential education) at Brevard College, Montreat College, and Warren Wilson College before 2017 in an effort to study the potential impact of graduating from an undergraduate outdoor-related program on the professional lives of alumni. We hope to learn how alumni of undergraduate outdoor-related programs perceive their degrees to have impacted their career, and which components of alumni's undergraduate degrees they perceive to be most influential on their careers.

What you will be asked to do: After completing this consent form, you will begin the survey portion of this study. In it, you will be asked several questions, including multiple-choice, short-response, and long-response questions. Some questions will relate specifically to the value your undergraduate outdoor-related academic program might hold for you, and others will seek demographic information. This survey is expected to take between 25-45 minutes for you to complete.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research.

Benefits: This study may help us better understand the value that undergraduate outdoor programs hold for their students and graduates, as well as which components of these programs may be the most influential on their alumni. This study may help undergraduate outdoor program

faculty and college administrations better understand their own outdoor program. At the end of your participation in this study, you will have the opportunity to request a summary of its results.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The data collected in this study are anonymous. This means that the research team cannot match you to your data. The data collected in this research study will be kept confidential. Participation in this research may involve some loss of privacy. We will do our best to make sure that the information about you is kept confidential, but we cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your personal information may be viewed by individuals involved in the research and may be seen by people, including those collaborating and regulating the study. We will share only the minimum necessary information to conduct the research. Your personal information may also be given out if required by law, such as pursuant to a court order. While the information and data resulting from this study may be presented at scientific meetings or published in a scientific journal, your name or other personal information will not be revealed.

We will collect your information through a Qualtrics online survey. This information will be stored in an encrypted cloud-based system.

The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the internet.

The researchers will give you a pseudonym and will generalize your quote to remove any information that could be personally identifying.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw, there will be no impact on you, and your decision does not affect your relationship with the institution you received your outdoor-related undergraduate degree.

Compensation for Participation: There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

Contact Information: For questions about this study, please contact Abigail Fuesler at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Andrew Bobilya, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at ajbobilya@wcu.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

Please download a copy of this Informed Consent document (linked), so that you may refer to it in the future.

Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Determination



DATE: 04-Oct-2023

TO: Andrew Bobilya
FROM: IRB

PROJECT TITLE: 2023-10-02-01, The Life Significance of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs:
Alumni Perspectives

SUBMISSION TYPE: IRB Request for Initial Review of Research

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

APPROVAL DATE: 04-Oct-2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category 2

Thank you for your submission of IRB Request for Initial Review of Research materials for this project. The IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. You may begin your research.

If you wish to make changes to your protocol, including recruitment procedures, sampling, consent, interventions, data collection methods, and investigators, please use the modification request form located in InfoEd.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 828-227-7212 or irb@wcu.edu. Please include your protocol number and project title in all correspondence with this committee.

Appendix D: Letter of Support – Brevard College

BREVARD COLLEGE

BREVARD, NORTH CAROLINA

September 6, 2023

Abigail Fuesler
Graduate Student in Experiential and Outdoor Education
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

Dear Abigail,

You are given permission to undertake a research study exploring the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program at it relates to alumni's careers. We understand that you will be collecting data from Brevard College alumni who graduated from the Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education program at least five years ago. We also understand that this study is qualitative and quantitative in nature, collecting data via an online survey, and that Brevard College, Warren Wilson College, Montreat College will be participating in this study concurrently.

It is understood that this will be a collaborative project conducted in coordination with myself, the Brevard College Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education major, Registrar's Office and Alumni Office and Western Carolina University. The research may commence in October of 2023 and may continue through March of 2024 with necessary pre-planning from September to October of 2023. During the pre-planning, adjustments may be made to the timeline. Brevard College WLEE will communicate with their alumni through various channels (email, institutional social media, personal social media, etc.) and assist in recruitment of participants so that the purpose of this study may be achieved. Brevard College will provide ongoing guidance and support to aid the successful completion of this study.

The research process, including the data collection, is designed to guard the confidentiality of the participants involved in the study. The data is only to be used for purposes consistent with the study's requirements. It is understood that all institutions involved will be provided with a final copy of the thesis.

We look forward to undertaking this study with you, as we believe it will further the development of our program, promote future outdoor academic program design, and contribute to the literature informing the professional and academic development of outdoor leaders.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Kafsky, Ph.D.
Coordinator & Professor of Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education
Director of Teaching and Learning
1 Brevard College Drive
Brevard, NC 28712
kafskyjl@breavrd.edu c. 828-577-5237

Appendix E: Letter of Support – Montreat College



August 29, 2023

Abigail Fuesler
Graduate Student in Experiential and Outdoor Education
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

Dear Abigail,

You are given permission to undertake a research study exploring the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program at it relates to alumni's careers. We understand that you will be collecting data from Montreat College alumni who graduated from the Outdoor Recreation or Outdoor Education program at least five years ago. We also understand that this study is qualitative and quantitative in nature, collecting data via an online survey, and that Montreat College will be participating in this study concurrently.

It is understood that this will be a collaborative project conducted in coordination with myself, Montreat College, and Western Carolina University. The research may commence in October of 2023 and may continue through March of 2024 with necessary pre-planning from September to October of 2023. During the pre-planning, adjustments may be made to the timeline. Montreat College will communicate with their alumni through various channels (email, institutional social media, personal social media, etc.) and assist in recruitment of participants so that the purpose of this study may be achieved. Montreat College will provide ongoing guidance and support to aid the successful completion of this study.

The research process, including the data collection, is designed to guard the confidentiality of the participants involved in the study. The data is only to be used for purposes consistent with the study's requirements. It is understood that all institutions involved will be provided with a final copy of the thesis.

We look forward to undertaking this study with you, as we believe it will further the development of our program, promote future outdoor academic program design, and contribute to the literature informing the professional and academic development of outdoor leaders.

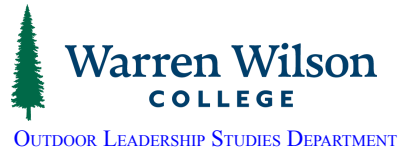
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan Zwart", written in a cursive style.

Ryan Zwart, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor – Studies in Education and Outdoor Recreation
Faculty of Science and Human Services
ryan.zwart@montreat.edu

P.O. Box 1267 | Montreat, NC 28757 | 828-669-8012

Appendix F: Letter of Support – Warren Wilson College



August 28, 2023

Abigail Fuesler
Graduate Student in Experiential and Outdoor Education
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

Dear Abigail,

You are given permission to undertake a research study exploring the perceived life significance of experiences in an undergraduate outdoor academic program as it relates to alumni's careers. We understand that you will be collecting data from Warren Wilson College alumni who graduated from the Outdoor Leadership program at least five years ago. We also understand that this study is qualitative and quantitative in nature, collecting data via an online survey, and that Brevard College, Warren Wilson College, Montreat College will be participating in this study concurrently.

It is understood that this will be a collaborative project conducted in coordination with myself, the Outdoor Leadership major, the Alumni Relations Manager, and Western Carolina University. The research may commence in October of 2023 and may continue through March of 2024 with necessary pre-planning from September to October of 2023. During the pre-planning, adjustments may be made to the timeline. Warren Wilson College will communicate with their alumni through various channels (email, institutional social media, personal social media, etc) and assist in recruitment of participants so that the purpose of this study may be achieved. Warren Wilson College will provide ongoing guidance and support to aid the successful completion of this study.

The research process, including the data collection, is designed to guard the confidentiality of the participants involved in the study. The data is only to be used for purposes consistent with the study's requirements. It is understood that all institutions involved will be provided with a final copy of the thesis.

We look forward to undertaking this study with you, as we believe it will further the development of our program, promote future outdoor academic program design, and contribute to the literature informing the professional and academic development of outdoor leaders.

Sincerely,

Jill Overholt, Ph.D.
Chair of Outdoor Leadership and Adventure Programs
Mailbox #6268
828-771-3820
joverholt@warren-wilson.edu

In the Swannanoa Valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains
PO Box 9000 ASHEVILLE NORTH CAROLINA 28815-9000 828-771-3007

Appendix G: OAP SLE Survey

The Value of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs: An Exploration of Alumni Experiences

Start of Block: Consent

Informed Consent

Western Carolina University

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: The Value of Undergraduate Outdoor Academic Programs: An Exploration of Alumni Experiences

This study is being conducted by:

Abigail Fuesler

Graduate Candidate

Experiential and Outdoor Education

Western Carolina University

Andrew J. Bobilya, Ph. D.

Professor and Program Director of Experiential and Outdoor Education

Western Carolina University

Description and Purpose of the Research: This study seeks responses from alumni who

graduated from the four-year outdoor-related academic programs (e.g. outdoor education, outdoor recreation, outdoor leadership, wilderness leadership and experiential education) at Brevard College, Montreat College, and Warren Wilson College before 2017 in an effort to study the potential impact of graduating from an undergraduate outdoor-related program on the professional lives of alumni. We hope to learn how alumni of undergraduate outdoor-related programs perceive their degrees to have impacted their careers and which components of alumni's undergraduate degrees they perceive to be most influential on their careers.

What you will be asked to do: After completing this consent form, you will begin the survey portion of this study. You will be asked several questions, including multiple-choice, short-response, and long-response. Some questions will relate specifically to the value your undergraduate outdoor-related academic program might hold for you, and others will seek demographic information. This survey is expected to take between 20-35 minutes for you to complete. The survey will save your information, so if you need to take a break, you can return to the survey if you return to it from the same device you started

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research.

Benefits: This study may help us better understand the value that undergraduate outdoor programs hold for their students and graduates, as well as which components of these programs may be the most influential on their alumni. This study may help undergraduate outdoor program faculty and college administrations better understand their own outdoor program. At the end of your participation in this study, you will have the opportunity to request a summary of its results.

Privacy/Data Security: The data collected in this study are anonymous. This means that the research team cannot match you to your data. We will collect your response through a Qualtrics online survey, and responses will be stored in an encrypted cloud-based system.

The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to responses because you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the internet. At no point in time will the research team have access to your IP address.

The researchers will give you a pseudonym and will generalize your quote to remove any information that could be personally identifying.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw, there will be no impact on you, and your decision does not affect your relationship with the institution you received your outdoor-related undergraduate degree.

Compensation for Participation: There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

Contact Information: For questions about this study, please contact Abigail Fuesler at agfuesler1@catamount.wcu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Andrew Bobilya, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at ajbobilya@wcu.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

Please download a copy of this [Informed Consent](#) information, so that you may refer to it in the future.

I consent and fit the requirements to participate, begin the survey. (1)

I do not consent, do not fit the requirements, and/or I do not wish to participate. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Western Carolina University Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study Project Title: The... = I do not consent, do not fit the requirements, and/or I do not wish to participate.

Page

Break

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Consent

College Selection What college did you attend?

Brevard College (1)

Montreat College (2)

Warren Wilson College (3)

Degree status Did you graduate with a Bachelor's degree majoring in an outdoor-related program, such as outdoor education, outdoor recreation, outdoor leadership, or wilderness leadership and experiential education?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Did you graduate with a Bachelor's degree majoring in an outdoor-related program, such as outdoor... = No

Page

Break

Year of Grad What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program?

▼ 1986 (1) ... 2022 (30)

Skip To: End of Survey If What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program? = 2022

Skip To: End of Survey If What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program? = 2021

Skip To: End of Survey If What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program? = 2020

Skip To: End of Survey If What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program? = 2019

Skip To: End of Survey If What year did you graduate with your Bachelor's degree from an outdoor-related degree program? = 2018

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Part One

Takeaways What were your most important takeaways or learnings (if any) from your outdoor-related degree program?



Page

Break

Explain Difference Please explain your answer to the previous question.

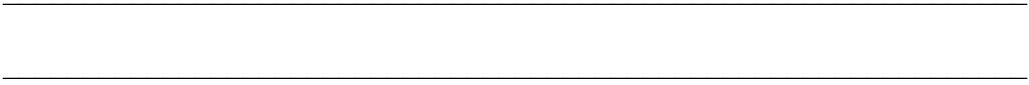
Difference Did your outdoor-related degree program make a difference in your life in any way?

Yes (1)

Maybe (2)

No (3)

How Difference If your outdoor-related degree program made a difference in your life, please provide one or more specific examples of how it did so.



Page

Break

Components A typical outdoor-related degree program consists of various components (e.g., internships, outdoor education courses, field (out-of-traditional classroom) experiences, faculty mentorship, peer interactions, etc.).

From which outdoor-related degree program component(s) did you learn the most? Please briefly describe what you learned.

Page

Break

Meaning Change Has your opinion of what your outdoor-related degree program meant to your career changed or remained the same in the years that followed the completion of your degree?

Remained the same (8)

Changed a little (9)

Changed a lot (10)

Unsure (11)

Why Meaning Change Please explain your answer to the previous question.

Page

Break

Other Influences How influential was your outdoor-related degree program on your career compared to other life experiences?

Most influential (4)

Very influential (5)

Somewhat influential (6)

Minimally influential (7)

Least influential (8)

Page

Break

Reminders of Memos Please select any and all reminders that you used to recall your experience (ex. journal, social media, photographs, textbooks, class notes, etc).

Journal (1)

Social Media (2)

Photographs (3)

Textbooks (4)

Class Notes (5)

Other (6) _____

None (8)

End of Block: Part One

Start of Block: Part Two

Explain Likert The following section focuses on the importance of the individual components of your outdoor-related degree program. Please evaluate how important the following components of your outdoor-related degree program were to you by selecting the circle that best describes your feelings.

Component Likert For each component that you did not experience in your outdoor-related degree program please select Not Applicable.

Not Applicable = Did not experience it or Do not remember it

	Not Important (1)	Slightly Important (2)	Moderately Important (3)	Very Important (4)	Extremely Important (5)	Not Applicable (6)
Certifications (Wilderness First Responder, Leave No Trace Trainer, etc) (1)						
Conference(s) (2)						
"Discovery" or North Carolina Outward Bound School Course (3)						

Exposure to
New Outdoor
Activities (4)

Faculty
Mentorship
(5)

International
Travel with
Outdoor-
Related
Degree
Program (6)

Internship (7)

Intensive
Semester
Experience
("Immersion")
(8)

Job Fair(s) (9)

Networking
Opportunities
(10)

Outdoor-
Related
Degree
Program
Curriculum
(12)

Outing Club
(13)

Other Clubs
(14)

Practicum
(16)

Peer
Mentorship
(18)

Peer
Friendship
(19)

Program
Alumni (21)

Teaching

Assistantship

(22)

Work Study

Program (23)

Anything Missing Is there a component that was not listed here that you believe was
Very Important or Extremely Important in relation to your learning?

No (1)

Yes (2)

Skip To: Courses If Is there a component that was not listed here that you believe was
Very Important or Extremely Im... = No

Page

Break

Explain Missing You responded that there was a missing component that was Very Important or Extremely Important in relation to your learning.

What was the component that you believe was Very Important or Extremely Important in relation to your learning?

Page

Break

Courses What are the names of the three most courses you took as a part of your outdoor-related degree program that have had the greatest influence on your career, and why were they influential?

End of Block: Part Two

Start of Block: Part Three

Transferability Do you feel that the skills or knowledge you learned in your outdoor-related degree program have been transferable to your career?

Yes (1)

Maybe (2)

No (3)

Explain Transfer Please explain your answer to the previous question.

Page

Break

Employment Status Are you currently employed?

Yes, full-time. (1)

Yes, part-time. (2)

No. (3)

Page

Break

Display This Question:

If Are you currently employed? != No.

Field, Broadly Do you consider your current job to be in the outdoor field?

Yes (9)

No (10)

Display This Question:

If Are you currently employed? != No.

And Do you consider your current job to be in the outdoor field? = No

Other field If you responded no to the previous question, what field do you consider your current job to be in?

Display This Question:

If Are you currently employed? != No.

Job title State your job title, and give a brief explanation of your duties.



Page

Break

Recommend Would you recommend earning an undergraduate degree from an outdoor-related program to someone interested in working in the outdoor field?

Yes (1)

Maybe (2)

No (3)

Explain Recommend Please explain your answer to the previous question.

Page

Break

Demographics The final set of questions seek to understand some of your demographic information.

Age of Enrollment How old were you when you enrolled in your undergraduate institution?

Age of Graduation How old were you when you graduated from your undergraduate institution?

Ethnicity What is your ethnicity? Select all that apply.

White/Caucasian (1)

American Indian (2)

African American (3)

Asian (4)

Hispanic/Latino (5)

Mixed Ethnicity (6)

Other (7) _____

Prefer not to say (8)

Gender What is your gender? Select all that apply.

Woman (1)

Man (2)

Non-binary (3)

Genderqueer or gender fluid (4)

Agender (5)

Transgender (6)

Prefer not to say (7)

Other (8) _____

Page

Break

Income What is your average annual income?

\$0 - \$25,000 (1)

\$25,001-\$35,000 (2)

\$35,001-\$45,000 (3)

\$45,001 - \$65,000 (4)

\$65,001 - \$85,000 (5)

\$85,000 + (6)

Prefer not to say (7)

Location In which state do you currently reside?

Alabama (1)

Alaska (2)

Arizona (3)

Arkansas (4)

California (5)

Colorado (6)

Connecticut (7)

Delaware (8)

District of Columbia (9)

Florida (10)

Georgia (11)

Hawaii (12)

Idaho (13)
Illinois (14)
Indiana (15)
Iowa (16)
Kansas (17)
Kentucky (18)
Louisiana (19)
Maine (20)
Maryland (21)
Massachusetts (22)
Michigan (23)
Minnesota (24)
Mississippi (25)
Missouri (26)
Montana (27)
Nebraska (28)
Nevada (29)
New Hampshire (30)
New Jersey (31)
New Mexico (32)
New York (33)
North Carolina (34)
North Dakota (35)

Ohio (36)

Oklahoma (37)

Oregon (38)

Pennsylvania (39)

Puerto Rico (40)

Rhode Island (41)

South Carolina (42)

South Dakota (43)

Tennessee (44)

Texas (45)

Utah (46)

Vermont (47)

Virginia (48)

Washington (49)

West Virginia (50)

Wisconsin (51)

Wyoming (52)

I do not reside in the United States (53)

Prefer not to say (59)

Page

Break

Display This Question:

If 50 States, D.C. and Puerto Rico = I do not reside in the United States

Q32 In what country do you currently reside?

Page

Break

Other Degree Have you earned or are you in the process of earning any degrees in addition to your undergraduate degree?

No (1)

Yes (2)

Page

Break

Display This Question:

If Have you earned or are you in the process of earning any degrees in addition to your undergraduate... = Yes

Specify Other Degree What degree did you decide to earn in addition to your undergraduate degree, and what was the field of study?

End of Block: Part Three

Start of Block: Block 6

Final Thoughts Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in an outdoor-related degree program as you reflect on its significance on your career? If so, please explain.

End of Block: Block 6

Start of Block: reCAPTCHA

Q8 To submit the survey, confirm you are not a robot.

End of Block: reCAPTCHA