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ABSTRACT

A discussion group and survey examined trip-staff training practices among outdoor and adventure recreation/education programs. Of the 40 participants, 80 percent worked with university noncredit programs, with the remaining participants representing university for-credit, military recreation, nonprofit, and for-profit programs. Although the outdoor programs differed greatly, there were some emerging trends. The most popular types of trips had leaders and were instructional. The leaderless "common adventure" style of programming was decreasing in popularity. Programs paid staff with varying types of payment, which included incentives and benefits. Staff were trained in-house through a progression of skill instruction, shadowing, volunteering, assisting, and then trip-leading. One highly recommended system was a mentoring program. Training curricula consistently focused on policies, procedures, emergency procedures, trip-leading philosophy, leadership and group dynamics, technical skill instruction, and teaching and leading methods. The training progression allows programs to evaluate and assess skills in emerging leaders. Most programs required a medical certification: first aid/CPR, wilderness first aid, or wilderness first responder. Creative methods of using point systems and incentives helped attract and retain trip staff. Standards of behavior were upheld regardless of the type of trip staff used. Even volunteers could be "shown the door." (Author/TD)

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Trip Staff Training Practices: Survey and Discussion Results

By

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Abstract

Several panel members presented how their university program handles the issue of trip staff training practices. This included such topics as type of trip staff, required certifications, skills verification process, training curriculum, benefits, communication methods, and monetary investments. All participants then discussed these topics in an attempt to gain ideas and examine emerging standards. A survey was administered to collect data on the practices used by those who participated in this session. This paper presents both the discussion and survey results.

Discussion Group Demographics

Approximately 40 people participated in the group discussion. University non-credit programs represented 80% of the participants with the remaining participants equally representing university for-credit, military recreation, non-profit, and for-profit organizations.

Trip Staff Demographics

Over 70% of the discussion group offered leader/lead or educational/instructional programs. Other styles utilized to a much lesser degree included guided trips, common adventure subsidized and common adventure unsubsidized. The most common type of trip staff used by these programs was paid trip leaders at 60%. An interesting finding was that for each style of trip, programs used multiple styles of staff. Thus, you could have a paid trip leader, and unpaid trip leader, paid instructors, and volunteers all leading the same style of program. Those entering the field will be happy to hear that a large percentage of trip staff are being paid for their efforts. A flat wage was most common but virtually all types of trip staff receive additional benefits such as incentive programs, pro-deals, and covered expenses.

Training Curriculum and Skills Verification

Curriculum was the one area of discussion that was agreed upon almost universally. Surprisingly enough, even programs that reported having no training program (i.e., folks who hired completely trained staff) even reported training their staff on certain topics. These topics include, in order of popularity: program policies and procedures, emergency procedures, trip philosophy, leadership and group dynamics, how to instruct or lead, basic technical skills, and equipment use and repair.

Who pays for this training? The program does! Over 75% of programs paid for the training process regardless of length.

Group discussion focused on methods of paying for training as well as ideas on how to recover expenses for folks that drop out after becoming trained. A prescreening and interview process seems to help weed out the freeloaders and unqualified individuals. In conjunction with the interview, a signed contract regarding time commitments owed for receiving the training was another possibility. If this commitment is not fulfilled, payment could be recovered for program expenses. Other ideas along these lines include grants that can be applied for, reimbursement of staff for training once they have already put in their dues, and point systems where trainees accrue points that can be used to attend more training or certification classes. One highly recommended system is a mentoring program. Out-of-pocket expenses are low, trainees gain valuable skills by shadowing competent staff members, and it even provides a method of evaluating the trainee. A win-win situation all around!

Verification of skills necessary to lead a trip came in a variety of ways. Ideas included obtaining a technical skill resume, requiring certifications such as ACA or AMGA, skills demonstration check-list, training manual with corresponding written tests, and serving as an assistant with an experienced staff member. The mentoring program goes hand in hand with skills verification. A large percent of programs are using a progression system where novices enter the program and proceed through classes, training sessions, volunteering, and assisting before actually being allowed to lead trips. Perhaps this accounts for why programs use so many different styles of trip staff for the same style of program.

Medical Certifications

Consensus among group participants was that Wilderness First Responder was becoming the industry standard. Survey results seemed to indicate that programs currently vary greatly in their certification requirements. Results by program are listed below.

Certification Required	Leader/Lead Trips	Educational/Instructional Trips	Guided Trips	Common Adventure
Ist Aid/CPR	61.5%	56.3%	50%	75%
WFA	30.8%	12.5%	66.7%	25%
WFR	23.1%	31.3%	0%	0%
WEMT	0%	6.3%	0%	0%

Communication and Discipline

There was much discussion on how to deal with volunteers who may be inappropriate for trip leading, violation of rules by unsupervised trip staff, and behavior inconsistent with the program vision and mission. A particular topic of interest was use of alcohol on trips. Almost all programs agreed that alcohol is taboo. Most often, however, trip staff are unsupervised and may “turn a blind eye” to alcohol consumption. Group consensus was that inappropriate behaviors could not be tolerated regardless of trip staff status (i.e., volunteer vs paid). Ways to head off this behavior before it starts is to have a thorough screening process, discuss vision and mission at the onset, set an atmosphere of zero tolerance, and discipline for any poor behavior. Even volunteers can be “shown the door”.

Trends and Conclusions

Most outdoor programs differ greatly due to factors such as organization size, funding, location, weather, local interests, etc. Thus, it's very difficult to compare programs and make generalizations. Having said this, group discussion and survey results show a few emerging trends. The most popular types of trips are leader/lead and instructional. The common adventure style of programming is decreasing in popularity. Programs are using paid staff with varying styles of payment, which includes incentives and pro deals. Staff are being trained in-house through a progression of skill instruction, shadowing, volunteering, assisting, and then trip leading. Training curriculum consistently focuses on policies, procedures, emergency procedures, trip leading philosophy, leadership and group dynamics, technical skill instruction, and how to teach or lead. This training progression allows programs to evaluate and assess skills in emerging leaders. Most programs required a medical certification but it varies between 1st aid/CPR, wilderness first aid and wilderness first responder. Programs believe in creative methods of using point systems and incentive programs to help attract and retain trip staff. Finally, standards of behavior must be upheld regardless of the type of trip staff used.

This discussion group and survey only scratches the surface of trip staff training practices. This author hopes to do a more complete industry survey of this topic.

Biography

Lynn Zwaagstra has been in the field of outdoor recreation for over 12 years. She enjoys a variety of outdoor activities including kayaking, rafting, climbing, and hiking. Lynn has worked for the National Outdoor Leadership School, military outdoor recreation, and university recreation. Currently, Lynn works as director of the Wilderness Recreation Center at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, and also works for the Wilderness Medicine Institute.



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