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University Outdoor Orientation Programs

Timothy S. O’Connell, Anna H. Lathrop & Ryan A. Howard

Dr. Tim O’Connell is a Professor of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. Tim teaches outdoor recreation and outdoor leadership. He is the Co-Founder of BaseCamp, an outdoor orientation program for students at Brock University. His research focuses on the impacts of outdoor orientation programs, sense of community, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on outdoor recreation in Canada. Tim is a 3M National Teaching Fellow. He enjoys canoeing, rock climbing, mountain biking and spending time with his family at their cottage.

Dr. Anna H. Lathrop is the former Vice-Provost and Associate Vice-President, Students, at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. She is also a Professor in the Department of Kinesiology in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at Brock University. Anna’s areas of teaching and research include the history of physical education and sport, children and physical activity, and pedagogy in higher education. Anna is a 3M National Teaching Fellow and the co-founder of Brock Basecamp. She enjoys kayaking, sailing, and cycling with her family in southern Ontario and along the south shore of Nova Scotia.

Dr. Ryan Howard is the Director of Research, Risk Management and Innovation at ALIVE Outdoors, an outdoor education and experiential education company headquartered in Toronto, Ontario. He is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock University in St. Catherines, Ontario where he co-founded Brock BaseCamp with Tim and Anna. Ryan works as a Canadian Risk Manager and Risk Consultant with schools, school boards, and corporations.

There are a wide variety of evidence-based orientation programs that are designed to assist students with their transition to university or college in their first year (Hollins, 2009; Hannah, 2018; Mintz, 2021). The goals of these orientation programs are for participants to have better academic performance, higher levels of social and emotional maturity, greater feelings of community with other students, faculty and staff, and a more positive view of the institution, among others (Lathrop, O’Connell, & Howard, 2012). Orientation programs also provide students with important “nuts and bolts” information such as how to register for courses, where to go for academic help, and often give tours of academic and residence buildings, among other activities.

Outdoor orientation programs (OOPs) are a form of orientation programs that use adventure-based programming to help achieve these goals. Bell, Holmes and Williams (2010) noted they have three key characteristics, including the use of small group sizes (typically 8 to 15 people), camping away from the college or university for one night or more, and using adventure-based activities such as canoeing, rock climbing, backpacking, etc. that are normally human powered and in a natural setting. OOPs use intentional programming such as group discussions, challenge and trust activities, and question-and-answer sessions during the adventure-based experiences to help frame the experience as a metaphor for life at college or university (Bell, 2022). The

OOPs program model allows for small groups to engage in the act of community building through recreational activities and communal living (i.e., camping).

The first outdoor orientation program was conducted in the United States by Dartmouth College in 1935 (Association for Experiential Education, 2011). Interestingly, it was a visit to Quebec for a winter carnival by a Dartmouth student that indirectly led to the development of the first outdoor orientation program (Bell, 2022). The student, who noted that people in Quebec celebrated being outdoors in the winter, started the Dartmouth Outing Club under the premise that the outdoors could be enjoyed, not just endured. Over time, leaders of the club noticed that participants developed technical skills, and importantly, created strong relationships with others. As a result, they began to offer trips to students prior to their first semester on campus. These trips were the first outdoor orientation programs (Bell, 2022). Since then, the number of OOPs at universities and colleges has risen dramatically. For example, Bell, Holmes and Williams (2010) identified 164 outdoor orientation programs at colleges and universities in the United States in 2006. This rose to 191 in 2012 (Bell, Gass, Nafziger, & Starbuck, 2014) and 212 in 2020 (Bell, 2022). It was reported that 17% of 1,207 higher education institutions in the United States had outdoor orientation programs in 2019 (Bell, 2022).

While there is a good deal of information about outdoor orientation programs in the United States, there was very little known about existing outdoor orientation programs in Canada (Lathrop, O'Connell, & Howard, 2012; McGarry, 2020) until 2020, when Jeff McGarry completed his Master's thesis at Laurentian University. McGarry (2020) used a passive environmental scanning approach (i.e., phone calls and internet search) to identify 21 outdoor orientation programs in operation in Canada in 2015-2016. This equated to about 20% of the 111 universities in Canada having some kind of OOPs. OOPs existed in seven different provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and

Nova Scotia). None were found in the remaining six provinces and territories (Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland Labrador, Yukon Territory, Northwest Territory and Nunavut) (McGarry, 2020). It is important to note that McGarry did not survey any of the 231 colleges or 58 CÉGEPs in Canada at that time.

Generally, these Canadian outdoor orientation programs (COOPs) exhibited the three key characteristics of OOPs identified by Bell, Holmes and Williams (2010). However, some programs (12 of 21, or 57%) used a mix of small and large group activities to help meet their goals (McGarry, 2020). Additionally, some programs didn't focus on incoming first-year students. Instead, they focused on student societies or other students in transition to university (McGarry, 2020). Some used residential camp settings ($n=7$), were mandatory and offered course credit ($n=3$), utilized student clubs to offer the COOP ($n=2$) and/or provided staff training to student leaders ($n=2$).

In order to better understand the characteristics of COOPs, McGarry (2020) also used an active scanning approach (i.e., interviews) with seven programs that met Bell, Holmes and Williams' (2010) three key characteristics. These interviews were conducted in 2017-2018 and were supplemented by online information from program websites and social media posts. The oldest program was started in 1971 at Laurentian University and the newest in 2014 at Vancouver Island University. There was a noticeable upswing of new programs starting between 2008 and 2021 with 5 COOPs providing their first events during these years (2008: Ryerson University (now known as Toronto Metropolitan University); 2010: University of Calgary, Brock University, McGill University; 2012: McMaster University). Primary goals of these programs including giving students the opportunity to make friends and build community, develop outdoor skills, foster environmental sustainability and connection to place, learn about being successful at university and improved physical and mental well-being (McGarry, 2020). These COOPs used a wide variety of adventure activities including canoeing, equestrian activities, surfing, sea kayaking, rock

climbing, backpacking, and challenge course activities, among others. McGarry (2020) noted that COOPs did have a uniquely national flavour as some were offered bilingually in French and English, canoeing was a predominant trip type, and a holistic approach to overall programming was used in most places. Interestingly, some COOPs were facilitated by outside contractors at some universities.

At least three of the COOPs identified by McGarry (2020) discontinued offering programs, most notably because of changes in personnel and lack of continuity and integration in the administrative structure of the university. McGarry (2020) indicated there was no noticeable growth trend in COOPs and that, by and large, Canadian outdoor orientation programs were isolated with little communication or collaboration among programs. One attempt to foster connections among outdoor orientation programs in Canada was the inaugural Canadian Outdoor Orientation Program Symposium in 2012. This symposium was organized by the authors of this paper (who founded the Brock BaseCamp OOP) and was co-hosted by staff from the McMaster MOOSE OOP. The symposium was a one-day event and was held at Brock University. It was modestly attended by approximately 25 outdoor orientation program staff and others interested in COOPs. Dr. Brent Bell, a leading researcher on OOPs in the United States, was the keynote speaker. Other agenda items included program sharing, research presentations, and small group discussions on hot topic and key areas of interest for COOPs. A second Symposium was scheduled for 2015 but was cancelled due to lack of interest in attending the event.

While there is a reasonable body of literature examining the impacts, effects and processes of OOPs in the United States, there is relatively little published research about COOPs. The authors of this paper represent the most prolific (although modest) source of Canadian-focused research on outdoor orientation programs with a total of five articles published in peer-reviewed journals or professional proceedings. O'Connell (2011) published the first known article about COOPs

which focused on the development of Brock BaseCamp. These authors have also reported their research on COOPs related to life effectiveness and campus integration (Lathrop, O'Connell, & Howard, 2012), community development, institutional affinity and transitional value (Howard, O'Connell, & Lathrop, 2016), a six-year overview of sense of community (O'Connell, Howard, & Lathrop, 2016), and sense of place (O'Connell, Lathrop, & Howard, 2019). Two doctoral dissertations related to COOPs have been conducted, including Rude's (2015) examination of COOPs and thriving and Shaffer's (2017) study regarding facilitating learning through time in nature. Rude subsequently published an article from his dissertation (Rude, Bobilya, & Bell, 2017). Meilleur et al. (2020) reported on their investigation of a mandatory outdoor orientation experience and found that participants perceived group bonding, nature, lifestyle and learning as being important outcomes. McGarry's (2020) Master's thesis is perhaps the most comprehensive overview of COOPs to date and relates Canadian programs to the overall body of knowledge related to outdoor orientation programs.

Despite the broad geographical and philosophical approaches to COOPs, it is clear they provide students with a wide range of benefits, most like those found in OOPs outside of Canada. Perhaps the most compelling evidence regarding the positive impact of COOPs and their importance to students are the personal testimonials shared by participants when they return from their outdoor orientation experience. Additionally, past participants who benefited from OOPs at the time they went to university or college have been keen to share with the authors the lasting impacts of their orientation programs and how they helped shape their academic, social and personal lives. COOPs face several challenges to remain viable in today's higher education climate including budget constraints, limited staff support resulting in "lone wolf" programs that rely on the time and energy of one person, lack of communication and support among COOPs across the country, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operational status of programs, relative lack of research data to support the effectiveness and

efficacy of programs and misunderstanding the goals, objectives and outcomes of COOPs by university personnel, parents and potential participants.

As interest in outdoor recreation, nature-based recreation and spending time outside has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, COOPs are well-positioned to continue to make positive impacts on students' transition to institutions of higher education. This is particularly important as having positive social connections has been shown to be one of the best indicators of student retention and successful completion of university degree programs. While not widespread, Canadian outdoor orientation programs occupy a unique niche in transition programs for students entering university.

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