Wilderness Week:
Communing Cross-Culturally in the Boundary Waters
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Supporting Research

Many colleges and universities offer outdoor programming to incoming students as a part of freshmen orientation, in hopes of increasing retention rates. Here are some results from programs similar to Wilderness Week:

- In a study of the Summer Frieside Experience Program at the University of New Hampshire, freshmen on a wilderness orientation showed retention rates that were 12% higher than the freshmen Camp group, a non-wilderness program of the same length (Gass, 2008).
- The Wilderness group showed a 22% higher retention rate than the control group, who went through the required two-day orientation on campus (Gass, 2008).
- Johnny Johnson, director of UW-Stevens Point Pathways to Point freshmen outdoor orientation program said, “Over the course of the 8 years we have been running Pathways to Point our retention rate is 83%.”

“The UWSP average retention rate over those same years is 76%. So, basically we have a 7% higher retention rate.”

Program Goals

The core goals of Wilderness Week included:

- Acting in personal, cultural and academic adjustments
- Building a community in order to provide students with a support system of peers and staff
- Helping students gain a greater understanding of the University of Minnesota, its systems and services
- Increasing retention rates and lowering attrition rates for participants over time

“This camping gives us lots of new experiences, like paddling a canoe, carrying it on our shoulders, trying new foods (even some that I don’t know what they are) and having adventures in wilderness. I never thought this would happen in my life!” -Participant

Participants

In 2010, 11 students participated and represented 9 countries:

- Austria
- Burundi
- China
- Germany
- Guatemala
- Haiti
- Nicaragua
- Norway
- South Korea

The following types of international students participated:

- Graduate Students
- Undergraduate Students
- Degree-Seeking Students
- Non-Degree Seeking Students
- New Students and Returning Students

“Is a great experience because you meet new people that could be a great friends for lifetime and also you see new amazing places. You learn about other cultures and do things that you never imagine.” -Participant

Student Learning Outcomes

The goals of Wilderness Week were developed based on University of Minnesota Student Learning Outcomes, as established by Student Affairs:

- At the time of receiving a bachelor’s degree, students:
  - Can identify, define, and solve problems
  - Understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies
  - Can communicate effectively
  - Understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression (across disciplines)
  - Have acquired skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning.

The curriculum for Wilderness Week was designed for students to engage with the staff, the environment and their fellow students in order to maximize the wilderness experience. Topics included:

- Intentional Cross-Cultural Conversations
- Reflecting on the Upcoming School Year
- Effective Goal Setting
- Learning about Nature and Developing an Appreciation for It
- Overcoming Adversity
- Problem Solving
- Community Building

“Because it was my first week here in Minneapolis I didn’t know anybody else. This was a perfect opportunity to get into contact with other students.” -Participant

Program Arrangements

Two Wilderness Week programs were launched in the summer of 2010. Students could select between these dates:

- August 21 – August 25, 2010
- August 30 – September 3, 2010

The trip was organized with YMCA Camp Menogyn in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Experienced guides from the camp led U of M international students on a canoe trip. Two nights were spent at Camp Menogyn and two nights were spent camping out on the trail.

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Program Activities

Participants tried many activities while on the excursion which included:

- Swimming
- Singing
- Canoeing
- Storytelling
- Cooking Over a Fire
- Relaxing in the Sauna
- Portaging with Canoes
- Sleeping in Tents
- Portaging with Canoes

Wilderness Week and Campus Internationalization

- Encourages cross-cultural dialogue
- Connects international students with ISSS staff
- Introduces international students to American camping culture
- Connects students across colleges, majors and disciplines
- Introduces foundations of intercultural competency, which leads to more successful integration into the wider campus
- Connects international students with US university staff/faculty

Ongoing Contact

- Participants have kept in contact with one another. They continue to see each other for social events, meals and some traveled together over breaks.
- Students have been involved with ISSS programs like the International Buddy Program and Small World Coffee Hour.
- ISSS staff hosted a reunion for the participants

“there you can meet some very friendly international friends. During the trip people get to know each other very well. We still keep close contact, even after it has ended.” -Participant

Future Program Development

- Involving U.S. students as participants on the trip
- Expanding the number of options and participants
- Offering class credit for Wilderness Week by having the students take an accompanying seminar throughout the semester
- Finding funding sources that can scholarship students with financial aid

Curriculum

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