A grounded theory investigation of program discontinuation at four-year colleges in the United States

Calvin Vaillancourt
Mentor: Brent Bell
What is an Outdoor Orientation?

- Outdoor orientation programs defined by Bell, Holmes & Williams in 2006
- Orientation or pre-orientation experience for first year students
- Conducted in small groups of 15 or fewer
- Use adventure experiences to orient students to campus and include at least one overnight in a wilderness setting
Outdoor Orientation Program Program Demographics

- (Data taken from Neighborhood Project)
- Over 200 programs nationwide
- Range from 30 students a year to 900 students a year
- 10 new programs yearly
- Around 5-6 programs discontinued yearly!

What year did your program begin?

- Frequency
- Std. Dev = 12.42
- Mean = 1992.8
- N = 149.00
Benefits of Outdoor Orientation Programs

- Higher GPA’s (Stogner, 1978, Gass, 1987),
- Increased rates of friendship formation
  - Increase in on campus social support (Devlin, 1996, Bell 2005),
- Better social skills development (Kafsky, 2001),
- Higher retention rates (Gass, 1987)
- Studies that control for selection bias show OOP students score lower than their peers prior to program and higher than or equal to after (Gass, 1984; Vlamis, 2002)
Research into sustainability of first year programs is rare. Hunter (2006) investigates sustainability freshman experience programs, stresses the importance of campus political process. Researchers in this study remained skeptical of hunters findings, considering other possible causes.
Researchers used a grounded theory approach

- Begin research without set hypothesis
- Rely on the data to show the patterns inherent within it
  - Looking for patterns that emerge within the data

Participants

- 24 OOP’s have discontinued within the last 5 years
- 12 programs were randomly selected from the 24
- Contacted relevant personnel at each institution
Methods Cont.

- Relevant Personnel were subjected to a 28 question interview designed with the help of former program directors to elicit unbiased answers.
- Completed interviews were transcribed and coded into nodes using the qualitative research tool Nvivo.
10 out of 12 schools agreed to being interviewed

13 interviews were gathered ranging from 30-90min

- 10 former program directors
- 3 former auxiliary staff members
- No administrators who made the decision to cut the programs consented to an interview
Seven nodes were found within the data.

- Financial
- Loss of key supporter
- Political
- Program integration
- Poor programming
- Risk Management
- Student Interest
From the coded data separate models were developed for each node.

Individual nodal models were consolidated into a single master model.

The master model was checked for congruency with the data.
Discontinued programs shared common history

- Developed as independent program from 1-2 energetic staff members
- Creates political separation serve students not campus system
- Develops with one administrator functioning as liaison to general campus
Exclusivity was a key criticism of discontinued programs

- Serve a small group of students
- Present research demonstrating their effectiveness
- Incur accusations of providing an unfair advantage to a small group of students
- Disconcerting logic, why not expand programs rather than discontinue them?
Questions?

- Quips, quotes, queries?