

More than a Trip

By John Graetz

In the fall of 2007, I came to Northland College excited for the opportunities that it presented such as a low faculty-to-student ratio and professional connections. But what I was really interested in was the new student orientation. Yes, I was interested and excited about the orientation to the college. It just happens that this was one of a number of trips comprising Northland's Outdoor Orientation (OO) program. I had an amazing trip and I learned pretty much everything I needed to know about college life, made some friends and began to realize what I was capable of. What I didn't realize was how much this experience would influence my time at Northland College.

After participating in the orientation program as an incoming freshman, I took the OO leadership class, became certified in Wilderness First Responder, planned and led a 12-day trip in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota as well as a 12-day backpacking trip on the North Country Trail, joined the steering committee for the orientation program and became the student coordinator for the entire program. In short, my freshman orientation experience cultivated the involvement that eventually defined my time as an undergraduate student.

Northland College began its OO program in the '1975/'1976 school year, and throughout the years it has gone through a number of changes. At first, trips were run at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center on the north shore of Lake Superior and ventured into the Boundary Water Canoe Area with the help of professional staff. A subsequent model was based out of the Pigeon Lake Field Station facility in the heart of the Chequamegon National Forest. All trips were led by upperclassmen who had received training, and numbers stabilized at around 60 participants. The next iteration of outdoor orientation at Northland College included the creation of the Outdoor Orientation Steering Committee, which hired the trail staff, trained them, planned the food, booked the facilities, planned the brochure

and organized the budget (involvement still hovered around 60 participants). In 1987, the fourth and present model of OO at Northland College was created. Research indicated that students who participated in an orientation trip were 80 percent more likely to graduate from Northland College. Trips were made mandatory for all incoming freshmen. The OO program was moved into the office of Student Development, and a student coordinator position was created to oversee the program.

I've spent a fair amount of time at Northland College helping students transfer from high school to college, which falls under the Department of Student Life (student development), and I discovered that I greatly enjoyed facilitating this process. This winter I received funding to attend the 14th Outdoor Orientation Program Symposium as well as the 30th Annual Conference on the First Year Experience. I discovered that Northland College's orientation program does many things right but there is still room to improve.

In my experience as an OO participant, all of the really cool and helpful stuff happened coincidentally. I learned where to get my books on campus, that I didn't need to ask to leave the classroom and what food was sketchy in the cafeteria because it just came up (three leaders and one dozen new freshmen . . . what else is the conversation going to drift to?). The nature ethic that was taught on that trip was simple: Leave No Trace. I brought *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, excerpts from which ended up being read aloud in that time between day and night. I developed more conservation ethic from these dusk readings than the program intentionally provided. Now some years later, I can still remember the blustery evening where my friend Davis read Leopold's "Good Oak" from *A Sand County Almanac*. I can remember the smell in the air. I can remember staring at the sky in a hammock as the clouds rolled in. I can remember that this is when I decided that

I would heat my future house with wood I chopped. I can remember that this is when I decided that I want to be connected to this Earth as closely as possible. I can remember that this is when my own wilderness ethic started. Looking back, that reading of “Good Oak” was the first real impact that college had on me . . . and I had brought the book myself!

When I led my first trip for the OO program, I looked back on what provided that little extra something . . . I realized that I kept on coming back to Leopold. When I put together my Duluth pack in preparation for a 12-day canoe trip, I included many books such as *Into The Wild*, *A Sand County Almanac*, *The Singing Wilderness* and *Constructing Nature* (an anthology that contains various nature writers). I was ready to share some ethical insights with Northland’s freshmen class. The readings were great—the group process was not. I was a sophomore leading freshmen, some of whom had a few years on me. Verbal fights broke out, there didn’t seem to be enough food and I didn’t really know how to resolve the issues that erupted in our group. I needed help!

The second trip that I led was amazing. I had acquired the skills to resolve the group process issues that came up. I was prepared with readings and discussion topics for every night. I had about ten pounds of books in my backpack . . . hiking on average 12 miles a day. (I didn’t really think that through.) I became known as the “word ninja” specializing in end-of-day debriefs among my co-leaders. Unfortunately, I ended up needing a non-emergency evacuation on the eighth morning of the trip. When I talked to everyone on the trip afterwards, they said it wasn’t the same after I left.

I never led a third trip, but instead I opted to oversee the entire program as the Outdoor Orientation Student Coordinator. I trained leaders in the classroom and in the field. I designed the refresher training before trips went out. I checked over every trip’s planned activities and helped debrief the

leaders formally and informally. Northland College offers two lengths of trips—12-day and five-day; I’ve never lead a five-day. Since I had the ability to oversee all of the trips, I realized that most five-day trips had so-so group process; there wasn’t a drive to make it better as most incoming freshmen can put up with a lot for five days. I discovered that there was almost no intentional building of environmental ethic, as almost every time I talked to leaders they either didn’t talk about it or just barely touched upon it.

This is not to say that nothing happened on these five-day trips. Everyone was learning basic wilderness skills, everyone knew how to set up a bear bag, the sense of community that seems to define Northland College became known to the participants and the practice of Leave No Trace was robust. These are no small accomplishments, but I wanted the program to offer more and it is in my personality to ask questions like, “How can we do this better?”

After much thought, I came to the conclusion that I could develop a field manual full of nature writings that would help build a wilderness ethic and include discussion tips and activities for improving group process. The goal of this manual is to give leaders tools for improving group process, building trust, building community and initiating conversations about environmental ethics. Another, and more academic, goal is to build the discussion skills of the incoming class through conversations on environmental ethics intended to enhance the incoming freshmen’s college experience.

According to Weidman’s (1989) *Conceptual Model of Undergraduate Socialization*, pre-college normative pressure plays a role in the development of norms, values and behaviour. This speculates that the orientation trip has an effect on where that student goes during their time at Northland College and possibly where they end up after college. Northland College’s orientation has all of the traditional facets of orientation in that students are taught appropriate class behaviour, practices of

a successful student and what to expect in their next four years. Beyond a traditional liberal arts education, Northland College has an environmental focus, and this focus could be more deliberate on OO trips. I feel that the orientation program can make this more intentional and more visible. Without a doubt, Northland College's orientation is preparing students for a traditional liberal arts education in untraditional ways, and by adding just a touch of intentional conversation on environmental ethics into the orientation, I believe that the program can be more successful.

A significant part of this manual is about increasing the transfer of experiences from the orientation trips to everyday life at Northland. In my research I found that Gass (1999) outlines several techniques that enhance transfer of learning—these are applicable to all adventure-based programs.

1. Design conditions for transfer before the course, program or learning activities actually begin.
2. Create elements in the student's learning environment similar to those elements likely to be found in future learning environments.
3. Provide students with the opportunities to practise the transfer of learning while still in the program.
4. Have consequences of learning be natural, not artificial.
5. Provide the means for students to internalize their own learning.
6. Include past successful alumni in the adventure program.
7. Include significant others in the learning process.
8. When possible, place more responsibility for learning in the program with the students or clients.
9. Develop focused processing techniques that facilitate the transfer of learning.
10. Provide follow-up experiences that aid in the application of transfer.

I am working to apply principles for transfer where appropriate and possible in my field manual. Journaling is a reoccurring element in my manual that works on skills (reflective

learning, conceptualizing ideas and written advocacy) that will directly transfer to a student's time at Northland College. Not all of these principles are appropriate for Northland College's orientation program. An example is including significant others on the trip.

I've found that writing a manual is more difficult than I anticipated. Debriefing is an art where every situation and group is different. A reading by one author may provide insights to the natural world for some and may put others to sleep. An activity that may help group process for one group may keep another from talking about the issues. My time at Northland College is also coming to an end, and creating a product that new leaders will want to pick up and use for the foreseeable future is a consideration that I am taking into account. While my field manual is not a finished product, I am looking forward to its implementation into the program. I hope that I can get young adults thinking about what a human relationship with nature and the environment really is. I hope to give leaders something to fall back on when things get rough and that will get more freshmen participating in class discussions.

References

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John Graetz graduated from Northland College in May 2011. He hopes to begin graduate studies in outdoor education and ultimately work as an outdoor educator in the setting of higher education.