

FOUNDATIONS AND PROCESSES WITHIN THE HIGHLANDER WILDERNESS ADVENTURE PROGRAM

Developed by: Doris J. Nielsen, 1979

Revised by Robert B. Smalley, 2016; Laura D. Thayer, 2020

“Adventure is not just a tool for those who consider themselves adventurous. Rather, it is a tool for personal growth no matter what your station in life. Purposefully choosing to step out of your comfort zone to try something new puts you in a position to learn and grow.” - Bruce Dunning in God of Adventure

Foundations of the program

The Houghton College Highlander Wilderness Adventure (HWA) Program has been developed upon the theory base of Outward Bound, The Vanguard Program and Project Ascend since 1979. The program focuses on experiential learning for growth, challenge, and discipleship in an outdoor setting. It is offered to incoming first-year and transfer college students and is intended to be a catalyst for the success of the students Houghton College experience. Highlander Wilderness Adventures offers a series of generalized conditions, events and objects which interact to produce a desired effect. These are not confined to the constraints of time within the program. For the participant the process begins long before the program begins and is expected to continue for a life-time.

What is the desired effect?

We believe that the Highlander Wilderness Adventure experience will stretch the total person. Our hope is that the student will experience joy after hardship and find satisfaction by participating in the hard work of adventure. We believe that HWA provides opportunities for the student to build self-confidence by learning and applying basic skills germane to outdoor adventure and group living. Ultimately, we believe the HWA process allows for students to look inward to self, outward to others, and upward to God.

Highlander Wilderness Adventures provides an environment to create a synthesis of problem-solving tasks set in a prescribed physical and social environment which impels the participant towards mastery. This striving towards understanding self and relationships, and mastery of skills, draws the participant to carefully consider the meaning and re-organization of their lives.

Key Program Components

“To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose oneself.” Kierkegaard

Prescribed Physical Environment

Highlander Wilderness Adventure offers an unfamiliar environment. The fact that the environment is unique, strange, different will help the participant to gain new insights on their old familiar environment, develop new ideas or experience pyridine shifts.

Personal Development

- To extend the participant’s awareness of self by identifying personal limits, helping them to recognize their needs and helping them to set goals
- To help the participant to recognize their role in society, responsibility to God, to self and to others
- To allow the learner to experience joy while participating in various activities

Interpersonal Effectiveness

- To expand the participant’s ability to respond to God and to others
- To help the participant to be able to have open and effective communication with God, peers and leaders
- To help the participant to build relationships

Environmental Awareness

- To enhance the participant’s awareness and understanding of the outdoors

- To encourage the participant to develop a sense of connectedness and caring for the creation
- To develop the participant's awareness of the fragility of wilderness

Cognitive Development

- To create an experiential environment that will cause the learner to participate and experiment
- To allow the participant to learn basic soft and hard skills
- To provide the participant opportunities to hear the thoughts of others through readings, discussion; and to synthesize those ideas
- To provide situations in which the participant can reflect, refine personal values, and examine spiritual commitments
- To allow the participant the opportunity to articulate their beliefs

Essential Components to Accomplish Learning Objectives

"The nature of the problems should represent a supportive environment for resolving the anxiety through wanting to master the task. It is this factor which tips the balance in favor of mastery as the adaptation of dissonance."

Walsh & Gollins, Outward Bound

The outdoor setting provides a highly stimulating environment which is a neutral environment and the lack of the "buffers" of civilization encourages the participant to exercise self-awareness, environmental awareness, and self-responsibility. Outdoor tasks tend to be straight forward and fraught with natural consequences and include the following characteristics:

Problem-solving Tasks

- Allows participants to analyze situations and look for solutions through experiential experiences such as initiatives, rock climbing, group living, trekking, backpacking, solo experience, canoeing, and group work.

Reflection

- Allows participants to consider God's Word, as well as the ideas of others through individual reflection opportunities, partner times, group rap sessions, solo, and debrief sessions.

Coping with Stress

- Provides participants exposure to challenging experiences which cause self-examination, renew commitments, rely on others in community, and to call upon God for help

Skills training

- Allows participants to apply learning from direct and indirect experiences towards and increase problem solving capabilities

Evaluation

- Provides participants feedback through personal interaction, "teachable moments", journaling, rap sessions, partner times and formal writing

Service

- Allows responsible participation in community through all group activities and projects

Program Elements

Highlander Wilderness Adventure includes a number of generic problem-solving activities to create opportunities for discovery and growth. Throughout the program, participants are engaged in activities such as, initiatives, games, rock climbing, group living experiences through camping and cooking, trekking through backpacking and canoeing, a solo experience, a "marathon" run, and intentional debriefing and feedback sessions, and are chosen for the following characteristics:

Organized

- Activities are planned, managed in an intentional sequential manner.
- Participants are to know what tasks they will be doing, but are not to know when they are to happen. Thus, providing a stressor and forcing the participant to rely upon the leadership and develop trust.

Incremental

- Activities are offered sequentially in regard to difficulty and consequence.
- Participants are given the tools to cope with lower stressors before being confronted with higher stressors.

Concrete

- Activities are concrete, recognizable problems limited in space and time, increasing the possibility of mastery.

Manageable

- Participants must be able to solve the activity with the use of basic skills, which have been taught incrementally, and with use of common sense, which provides a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with the experience.

Consequential

- Outdoor activities have natural consequences.

Holistic

- Activities should require the use of participants' physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual resources.
- Solutions often have a dramatic and immediate impact upon direction and meaning of a participant's experience.

The Interaction of Group Leader & Group

"That which does not kill me strengthens me." Victor Frankl

The group leader is an instrumental part of Highlander Wilderness Adventure, whose various roles and qualities are varied and sophisticated, and impact the participants experience. Leaders have a variety of roles. They are a translator, standing between the participant and the experience providing a bridge to help participants the interpret and re-organize the experience to process what they have learned. Leaders are initiators of activities and experiences, and engineers of the group experience. Leaders must transmit skills necessary for safe and effective group experiences through a balance of organizing and authority. The leader must be a teacher, able to use leadership styles which are appropriate to the situations presented. The leader must be an effective example of good character and high moral standards to bring about needed growth in the participants.

Highlander Wilderness Adventure looks for leaders committed to a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ, and for qualities like openness, engaging, reflective, insightful, compassionate, possess a good self-image, and be a servant. HWA leaders create opportunities for participant's through mastery of concepts and solving concrete and manageable problems. The support of the peer group and leader help the learner to feel accomplishment, self-worth and pleasure. There is a need for participants to begin to re-organize the meaning of their experiences during the program so that they can apply new skills, values, and attitudes learned to life beyond the HWA program, in college, home and the rest of the world.

The small group experience of 8 to 12 people should not be under estimated. Small groups are the key to the HWA process and reflects on how Jesus worked to bring about growth through cooperation and problem-solving within a small community of people. The group is large enough to possess and accommodate different behavior types, yet small enough so that cliques will not form. It is large enough to experience conflict but small enough to resolve the conflict. Additionally, the group size is large enough to provide reciprocity, a system of give and take amongst group members with particular strengths and weaknesses, which will allow for task mastery and group bonding.