

# FOUNDATIONS AND PROCESSES WITHIN THE HIGHLANDER WILDERNESS ADVENTURE PROGRAM

*“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 Highlander Wilderness Adventure (HWA) at Houghton University was founded in 1979 and continues to be based upon the theory of change used by organizations such as Outward Bound, The Vanguard Program, and Project Ascend – providing experiences that act as a catalyst for encouraging positive change in one’s life such as when positive results are seen from one small change encourage further change and growth.

The HWA program focuses on experiential learning for growth, challenge, and discipleship in an outdoor setting. Research confirms that adventure in natural environments improves psychological outcomes such as self-efficacy, resilience, and well-being. Offered to incoming first-year and transfer students, the HWA provides a foundation for their success as they embark on their Houghton University experience. Specific learning and strategies are integrated into The Highlander Wilderness Adventure’s curriculum to deliver stronger and more lasting outcomes. Instructors and group leaders qualified both as outdoor practitioners and to facilitate learning, work with participants for the duration of their program. The benefits are not confined to the constraints of time within the program. For the participant, the process begins long before arriving at the program and is expected to continue for a lifetime.

## Personal Learning and Impact

The Highlander Wilderness Adventure experience is designed to stretch the total person. Participants experience joy after challenge, confidence after uncertainty, and satisfaction after the hard work of adventure. Through learning and applying the basic skills germane to outdoor adventure and group living, the HWA provides opportunities for the student to build self-confidence and self-awareness. When positively experienced, these encounters encourage them to embrace, rather than avoid, challenges and uncertainty in the future. Ultimately, we believe the HWA process allows students to look inward to self, outward to others, and upward to God.

The Highlander Wilderness Adventure 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 along with the mastery of skills, draws the participant to carefully consider the meaning and re-organization of their lives.

*“To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose oneself.” – Søren Kierkegaard in Works of Love*

## Key Program Components

### Prescribed Physical Environment

Highlander Wilderness Adventure operates within an unfamiliar environment. Within this unique, strange, and unpredictable environment, participants are able to gain new insights, increase knowledge and understanding, develop new skills, and improve attitudes and behaviors on health, well-being, grit, and self-worth to bring back to their old familiar environment—developing new ideas and experiencing paradigm shifts.

### Deliberate Personal Learning Outcomes

The Highlander Wilderness Adventure course is all about learning and the impact this has on the individual. The specific outcomes for Highlander Wilderness Adventure are integrated throughout the experiences and the curriculum:

#### *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

*“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*

### **Essential Components to Accomplish Learning Objectives**

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 straightforward 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, and solo, and debrief sessions.

**Coping with Stress** – Provides participants exposure to challenging experiences that cause self-examination, renew commitments, rely on others in community, and 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, and 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 the 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 on the direction and meaning of a participant’s experience.

*“That which does not kill me strengthens me.” - Victor Frankl in Man’s Search for Meaning*

### **The Interaction of Group Leader & Group**

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 translators, standing between the participant and the experience providing a bridge to help participants to interpret and reorganize 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 that 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, possessing a good self-image, and being a servant. HWA leaders create opportunities for participants 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 university, at home, and in the rest of the world.

The small group experience of 8 to 12 people should not be underestimated. Small groups are the key to the HWA process and reflect 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.

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