

Increasing Student Participation in Outdoor Education Programs:

New York City Outward Bound's 5 day Crew Orientation Program

by

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Table of Contents:

Title	Page 1
Table of Contents	Page 2
Chapter One: Introduction	Page 3
Chapter Two: Literature Review	Page 10
Chapter Three: Research Methods	Page 13
Chapter Four: Results	Page 16
Chapter Five: Discussion & Recommendations	Page 22
Chapter Six: Conclusion	Page 27
Works Cited	Page 28

Chapter 1: Introduction

Value of Outdoor Education & Expeditionary Learning:

New York City Outward Bound Schools use the teaching model of Expeditionary Learning, which uses rigorous and inquiry-based projects and places equal emphasis on academic development and character development. Among the 10 guiding principles of Expeditionary Learning are to cultivate learning through collaboration, success and failure, solitude and reflection, and service and compassion. (Riordan and Klein 2010). The model of Expeditionary Learning places an inherent value on the natural environment, incorporating this as one of the principles. Expeditionary Learning was developed as an alternative to traditional education in the United States that brings students beyond the classroom learner and builds self-concept through active participation in the learning expeditions. (Springfield 1996).

Outward Bound International:

Outward Bound is an international non-profit organization for outdoor education with approximately 40 centers around the world. Outward Bound programs use wilderness expeditions and outdoor challenges in order to increase character development among participants. The Outward Bound model was developed by German educator Kurt Hahn. During the 1940's in World War II, Hahn observed that the seamen who survived best during the war were seasoned and tenacious, rather than the young, fresh, and energetic. Hahn attributed this strength to surviving and persevering through challenges; he developed the Outward Bound model to create opportunities for young people to learn by persevering through challenges in the outdoors and wilderness.

New York City Outward Bound Schools (NYCOBS):

New York City Outward Bound Schools is a network of 10 public schools in New York City, all of which are based on the Outward Bound model and which use the Expeditionary Learning Method. All 10 of these schools are designed by NYCOBS school designers, experts in Expeditionary Learning and in adolescent education. While each school is distinct and unique, the schools share common values and some common aspects in their design. For example, each school employs the Expeditionary Learning model of “learning expeditions” which deeply explore academic subject matter using multiple disciplines, research, and active, experiential learning. (NYCOBS) All NYCOBS schools also employ a student advisory group, or Crew, which provides a compassionate, consistent, and supportive environment to students during their high school career. Each school in the NYCOBS network also affords students the opportunity to participate in a Crew Orientation outdoor education program. The schools share basis in Expeditionary Learning methods, outdoor education opportunities, and the Outward Bound model.

NYCOBS Crew Orientation:

New York City Outward Bound Schools (NYCOBS) provides 4 & 5-day backpacking expeditions for ninth grade students during the Crew Orientation Program. Crew Orientation is a fundamental part of the NYCOBS teaching model as it is an opportunity for students to set goals and overcome challenges, learn and practice life skills they will use during their high school career, and to build a community and support structure at school.

Students from Outward Bound’s 10 partner schools participate in Crew Orientation with their high school “Crew,” or advisory group. During the tumultuous teen years and transition to high school, research shows that having a consistent and caring advisory group has a positive impact on adolescent development. As students switch from class to class, with a shifting group of students and teachers, it is important to have at least one consistent time of day over the academic career. (Mac Iver 1996). NYCOBS uses Crew in order to satisfy the need for a

consistent and compassionate group during the high school years, and sends each Crew onto the Crew Orientation in order to establish the desired group norms, trust, and support.

In addition to the group outcomes mentioned above, NYCOBS and Crew Orientation aim to meet individual learning goals and character development. Current research reflects that development of certain character traits--such as tenacity, resilience, and grit--lead to academic and personal success. (Tough 2011) These are traits that NYCOBS aims to foster through Crew Orientation. During Crew Orientation, many students achieve things they may have never thought possible. Students step outside of their comfort zones by hiking up a mountain, sleeping under the stars, and practicing self-reliance. Many of these activities require students to try several times in order to succeed, building their resilience and grit. Some of the skills students learn include cooking healthy meals, navigation using a map, and contributing to a positive team dynamic. Students participate in a low challenge course where they must try new communication skills and conflict resolution tools that will help them in their high school career and beyond. On the high challenge course, students practice using trust and courage to overcome group challenges and individual fears. They learn how to take small steps to overcome a large challenge, and to trust in their support systems in order to achieve big goals.

Students consistently show positive outcomes from these programs, such as an increase in communication and conflict resolution skills. In the academic year 2011-2012, 94% of students self-reported that during Crew Orientation they learned to set goals and achieve them, and 95% reported they learned new approaches for taking on challenges. (Olson & Miller 21)

Alumni of the Crew Orientation have overwhelmingly positive things to say about the program. Even students that were hesitant to participate end the week having made leaps and bounds in their personal development. During Crew Orientation, students develop strong bonds with their “crew.” These social bonds and sense of community help provide students with a strong support system over their tumultuous high school years. One of the teachers reported in an evaluation that Crew Orientation is “essential to our school community.” (Olson & Miller 30)

Significance of the Problem:

In spite of these positive outcomes, participation rates for the Crew Orientation program ranges from 60% to 99%, depending on the school. Outward Bound aims for at least 80% of eligible students to participate, but does not always meet these minimum participation percentages. From 2011-2012, only half of the network schools met this minimum participation goal. Each year, hundreds of students elect not to participate in Crew Orientation, and do not reap the personal and academic benefits of participation. These students remain at school--however, as their peers and teachers are participating in Crew Orientation, their school day activities are not as rigorous or academically enriching as normal school days. The opportunity cost of not attending Crew Orientation, therefore, includes missing the powerful Crew Orientation experience and missing the normal school day structure.

Research Question & Objectives:

How can New York City Outward Bound increase participation in its 5-day Crew Orientation program?

- ❖ Identify the main barriers to participation in NYCOB's 5-day Crew Orientation program.
- ❖ Create a dialogue with students regarding the barriers to participation in Crew Orientation, and identify areas where NYCOB can overcome these barriers.
- ❖ Establish strategies for breaking down barriers to participation, and for increasing parent, teacher, and student buy-in for the Crew Orientation Program.
- ❖ Recommend steps for NYCOB to take in order to increase its level of student participation in Crew Orientation.
- ❖ Describe how these barriers to participation and strategies for increasing participation can be generalized from the case of NYCOB to other outdoor education programs working with urban youth.

Definition of Terms:

Alumni: Student who successfully completed the Crew Orientation program

Crew: Advisory Group which meets daily and provides support system for students

Crew Advisor: School staff who leads Crew, usually for the entirety of each student's 4-year high school career

Crew Orientation: 4 or 5-day backpacking trip including high and low challenge course

Expeditionary Learning: the educational model used by NYCOBS, based on authentic and in-depth projects, and using the Crew model to support student personal and academic growth

Field Instructor: NYCOBS staff who leads Crew Orientation backpacking trip

NYCOBS: New York City Outward Bound Schools

Point Person: Staff person at NYCOBS partner school who acts as liaison for Crew Orientation

School for Community Leaders: Expeditionary Learning School for Community Leaders, case study location located in Gravesend Brooklyn, is commonly referred to as the "School for Community Leaders"

Validus: Validus Preparatory Academy, case study location located in Claremont, Bronx, is commonly referred to simply as "Validus"

Origins and Scope of this Study:

From 2010-2011, 18 months prior to data collection for this study, I worked as a full-time Field Instructor for NYCOBS. My experiences as an instructor were highly positive and motivating. Each week I watched students go through a transformation, on an individual level and in their Crew advisory group. The results were clear and tangible to me, and I decided to focus on this as a topic for my graduate research project. The most important question to me was, "why aren't more students taking advantage of this learning opportunity?"

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research:

- This study involves youth under the age of 18 from New York City. While I received permission from School Principals and from each participant's Parent/Guardian, I did not have 100% access to student information such as family demographics, academic standing, and other personal data. I believe that this data may contribute to a greater understanding of each student's reasons for attending or not attending Crew Orientation. In addition to the recommendations reported in this paper, I believe that individual schools may be able to better understand individual student situations by examining personal, family, and academic data. I think that this supplemental approach, in addition to my recommendations listed in the "Discussions" section of this paper, will be an effective approach to increasing student participation in Crew Orientation.
- This study relied on focus groups, interviews, and self-reported assessments. As this data is self-reported from student participants, it is subjective in nature. For further study, I recommend gaining access to quantitative data sets including individual student attendance records and participation rates to supplement the qualitative data outlined in this study.

Assumptions of this Study:

My role as a former Field Instructor provided me with many good resources and connections, as well as a deep understanding of the NYCOBS organization and Crew Orientation. My role also

instilled in me an appreciation and respect for the Crew Orientation Program. The goal of this study is to shed light on the barriers preventing students from participating in Crew Orientation, and ultimately to increase participation in the Crew Orientation program.

This research study assumes that NYCOBS's Crew Orientation provides important benefits to students, including: character development, role modeling from teachers and NYCOBS instructors, practice in problem-solving, the formation of a support system that will continue at school, and pushing students to set and achieve high goals.

Additional assumptions/hypotheses:

- If teachers and school administration are not advocates of NYCOB's Crew Orientation program, communication and information will not reach all students and their parents; therefore, participation rates will be low.
- If parents are not fully bought-into the benefits of NYCOB's Crew Orientation program, fewer students will participate and therefore fewer students will reap the benefits of this program.
- Lack of information and misinformation about outdoor recreation and Crew Orientation may prevent parents from letting their students participate in the program.
- Varying cultural norms and gender views may cause parents to hesitate in allowing their students to participate in Crew Orientation.
- If NYCOB provides student-led information sessions for teachers, parents, and other students, it can increase buy-in for the Crew Orientation program.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Benefits of Outdoor Education:

Existing literature addresses a variety of aspects of Expeditionary Learning, outdoor education, and the Outward Bound model. Aspects of these educational models explored in existing literature include: the benefits of outdoor education to young people, strategies for maximizing the effectiveness and value of outdoor programs, and trends in participation in outdoor activities. New York City Outward Bound's own program evaluations and reports affirm the value of Crew Orientation to students, teachers, and parents—and the organization employs a variety of strategies to maximize its benefits to participants. NYCOBS's research shows the positive outcomes of Crew Orientation related to character development. Teachers and students also provide strong support for the benefits of Crew Orientation. (Olson and Millern 2012)

Barriers to Outdoor Participation

What is still needed is an understanding of how to increase student participation in order to offer these benefits to a greater number of young people. Past research shows that the main barriers to participation in outdoor recreation activities are the lack of time and the lack of money. Both of these barriers are already addressed by NYCOBS's Crew Orientation program—as a school activity, students' school time is used for participation. And as a free program (with all outdoor gear provided), students do not need to pay or purchase anything in order to participate.

Ken Cordell's 1999 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment showed many of the barriers to participation in outdoor recreation activities that have been identified through past research are significantly higher for Latinos, African Americans, and inner-city low-income residents than for the general population. Among the most striking of these barriers to participation is a concern for personal safety, which is a barrier to only 14% of the general

population in contrast with 23.5% of African Americans, 21.1% of Latinos, and 36.9% of inner-city low-income residents. (Cordell 1999)

These initial findings are substantiated further by a study in 2001 conducted by Cassandra Johnson et. al., titled “Outdoor Recreation Constraints: An Examination of Race, Gender, and Rural Dwelling.” Johnson found African Americans to be four times more likely than white Americans to be concerned about their personal safety during outdoor activities. (Johnson 2001)

Cordell's research showed another striking barrier to participation in outdoor activities was the lack of information—which counted as a barrier for only 21.1% of the general population, while 30.7% of African Americans, 28.7% of inner-city low-income residents, and 34.1% of Latinos noted a lack of information on outdoor recreation activities. (Cordell 1999)

Both of these examples show that the barriers for inner-city low-income residents, African Americans, and Latinos are different than for the general population. These findings are significant to NYCOB because a large demographic of students who participate in Crew Orientation are Latino, African American, and/or inner-city low-income residents. Additionally, these statistics may reflect a difference in perceptions about outdoor recreation activities or on the information about outdoor activities that is readily available to different demographic groups.

Limitations of Existing Literature

While the existing research provides valuable insight into the barriers to participation in outdoor recreation, it is limited in three ways. First, the two studies above took place over a decade ago and cited previous studies which took place over two decades ago. With the rapid changes in United States population, the data collected and the conclusions are likely to have undergone changes since that time.

Second, the majority of current research addresses the general population, ranging in age from youth to elderly. NYCOBS works specifically with youth ranging in age from roughly 10-19 years of age, the majority of whom are secondary decision-makers to parents/guardians. These young people and their parents/guardians rely heavily on information about Crew Orientation provided by the school, as they depend entirely on school support for access to the outdoor experience.

Third, the existing body of research surrounding barriers to outdoor exploration by urban and minority students is generally limited to a few studies. It is my hope that my research and its qualitative methods will create a more robust pool of data, and that this data and my recommendations will guide outreach among outdoor programs.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Research Methodology

This project uses qualitative data collected using focus groups and interviews at two different NYCOBS schools: Expeditionary Learning School for Community Leaders (henceforth known as “School for Community Leaders”), located in Gravesend, Brooklyn, and Validus Preparatory Academy, located in Claremont, Bronx. These schools were selected based on their below average participation rates in Crew Orientation as well as on their diverse student bodies, which I anticipate will yield interesting information and insights for the field of outdoor education.

Validus Preparatory Academy has a student body composed primarily of Latino, African American, and recent African immigrant students. The school has a higher proportion of Muslim students than other NYCOBS schools, which may be one of the cultural factors that contributes to a low participation rate. During initial conversations with NYCOBS stakeholders, field instructors and program managers noted anecdotally that Muslim students may have barriers to participation related to religion: including the need to pray to Mecca five times per day, concerns about food provided during program, and privacy of young female students.

The School for Community Leaders is a truly diverse institution with students representing several major regions of the world: North America, Central/South America, Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and Asia. Diversity of religions, backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences in the outdoors is correspondingly diverse. This school was selected in hopes that the results would represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences with outdoor programs; therefore, providing interesting and significant results for NYCOBS and for the field of outdoor education.

Data Collection Process

At Validus Preparatory Academy, data collection took place in January of 2014. All 9th grade students were invited by the school's NYCOBS Point Person, Myrna, to participate in a focus group. The focus group took place during a school lunch period, and pizza was provided for participants. A total of 10 students participated in the focus group: 8 of whom attended Crew Orientation, and 2 who did not attend.

At the School for Community Leaders in Brooklyn, data collection took place in June of 2014. All 9th grade students were invited by the school's NYCOBS Point Person, Jason, to participate in a focus group. The focus group took place after school hours, and pizza was provided for participants. A total of 8 students participated in the focus group: 7 of whom participated in Crew Orientation, and 1 who did not participate in the trip.

Students from both Validus Preparatory Academy and the School for Community Leaders were required to bring signed "Informed Consent" forms. These forms required acknowledgement by students and by guardians that the student would participate in a focus group related to Crew Orientation, and authorized permission to share information related to Crew Orientation.

Both focus groups used the same 10 questions to prompt student discussion. The questions started with basic questions about Crew Orientation, followed by questions about the different influences and decision-makers regarding Crew Orientation, and culminated in questions regarding ideas for increasing student participation. The list of focus group questions is available in Appendix B.

Interviews took place with NYCOBS Point Persons at both Validus Preparatory Academy and the School for Community Leaders. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and covered 4 main questions regarding current efforts at increasing participation, potential barriers, and ideas for increasing participation. The list of interview questions is available in Appendix C.

Treatment of the Data

All data was recorded by hand and by audio. After the focus groups and interviews, data was typed up into a computer and audio recordings were destroyed. Data was stored on a private Google drive, accessed only by myself and by my Research Adviser, Dr. Richard Wilke. Informed consent forms will be kept in a private folder for 3 years after completion of the study, and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using open and axial coding. Data was reviewed three times, and was then aggregated into three primary sections, or open codes: causes of the problem, influences in decision-making, and solutions to the problem. Open codes were determined based on the unique number of student references during focus groups. The following codes were the main themes referenced repeatedly by various students during focus groups: Causes of the Problem and Influences in Decision-Making.

Table 1: Open Codes

Causes of the Problem: Reasons why students elect not to participation in Crew Orientation
Influences in Decision-Making: Various parties/persons who impact a student's decision to participate or not participate in Crew Orientation.

During axial coding, data was reviewed several more times in order identify relationships within the established set of open codes. The axial codes were determined based on the number of unique student references. For example, each time a participant cited a concern for "not having access to a cell phone" during Crew Orientation, that reference was tallied in the sub-category of "Causes of the Problem: Concerns for Physical Safety."

Chapter 4: Results

Focus Group Overview:

Data from the focus groups was analyzed using open coding and axial coding. Information was first grouped into 2 categories: causes of the problem and influences in decision-making. Within each of these open codes, data was examined for relationships and grouped into sub-categories based on the number of unique references. Using these research methods, I examined each of the two open codes to understand student attitudes and decision-making surrounding Crew Orientation.

Causes of the Problem:

Causes of the problem that were most frequently referenced included language barriers in communicating, concerns for physical safety outdoors, and concerns for emotional safety. These causes of the problem are consistent with the results of previous research cited in **Chapter 2: Literature Review**. The focus groups demonstrated that many students, and their families, had concerns for physical and emotional safety.

Physical safety concerns included a worry about the lack of communication and cell phones; concerns about safety in the outdoors; concerns about privacy and interpersonal safety within the group; and, concerns about hygiene and a lack of showers. When asked if Crew Orientation was similar or different to what the students expected, one student responded "I couldn't use cell phones or talk to my family." This student concern addressed both physical safety and emotional safety--a concern for being unable to contact the outside world, and to talk to loved ones.

Emotional concerns were the most commonly reference barrier, or cause for student concern prior to Crew Orientation. Emotional concerns included a worry about spending intensive time

with new people; a worry about missing family and friends in New York City; and, a worry that the family would not be able to succeed during the student’s absence. One Leaders student noted “I was worried about sleeping in a cabin with new people. I was also worried about my Mom because I have little brothers and sisters she relies on me a lot.” At Validus, 8 out of 10 students referenced serious concern or nervousness for being away from family and spending time with new students. At Leaders, 6 out of 8 students referenced similar emotional concerns.

However, interestingly at both schools, students who attended Crew Orientation also noted that the trip was worth attending in spite of fear and nervousness. Of the 8 Validus students who had emotional safety concerns, 7 attended Crew Orientation--and 6 of 7 students said they were glad they did. One female student noted: “I was scared because I didn’t know anybody and I was uncomfortable sleeping with them but we got used to it and it felt like family.” At Leaders, all 6 students who referenced emotional safety concerns were glad that they attended Crew Orientation in the end.

Table 2: Axial Codes

Causes of the Problem	Language Barrier	Concerns for Physical Safety	Concerns for Emotional Safety
Influences in Decision-Making	Family	Teachers	Peers

Language barriers were addressed at both schools throughout the focus groups. Clear information around Crew Orientation did not always reach parents due to language barriers. Parents of many students spoke only Spanish, French, Wolof, and Arabic. NYCOBS provides information in Spanish and English, and in some cases in other languages. However, due to the diversity of its students and the number of languages spoken, communication is problematic. Additionally, Crew Orientation is a unique program that is unfamiliar to many urban residents who have little experience in the outdoors. This causes the language barrier to be especially apparent, and precludes NYCOBS staff and school administration from communicating fully the

benefits of Crew Orientation, and from alleviating other barriers, such as concerns about physical and emotional safety.

Influences in Decision-Making:

Influence One: Family

Three main groups were referenced by students regarding the decision to participate or not to participate in Crew Orientation. The first, and most fundamental, was family. 100% of students, or 18 out of 18 in both focus groups, discussed making the decision with their mother. 9 out of 18, or 50% of students in both focus groups, discussed their father's role in making the decision. 5 out of 18 students discussed their siblings, and 3 out of 18 students discussed extended family, including aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

Students whose family supported Crew Orientation cited character development, new experiences, and opportunities for growth as reasons for their family's support. As one student from Leaders said, "My parents knew it would be difficult but they said to go. They knew I would be aggravated and frustrated but that this would help me learn to deal with those feelings." It is worth noting that this student affirmed Crew Orientation did indeed equip him with some strategies for dealing with feelings of aggravation and frustration.

Although the mother and father were the primary familial influences, attitudes among parents varied greatly. The majority of students, 14 out of 18, said that although their mother was nervous and would miss the student, that their mother supported attending. 3 of the 18 students whose mother did not support Crew Orientation did not attend Crew Orientation. This parental view was described by one Validus student: "Mom didn't want me to experience anything new. My uncle and Aunt think I am too small to care for myself." The final student who attended Crew Orientation, but whose mother did not express support for the trip, expressed that his parents left the decision entirely up to him--and the student decided to attend in order to prove his independence and trustworthiness. This final student is quoted as saying "I was excited to go

into the wilderness and get away from Mom, I wanted to show people I could be a leader and someone people could trust. Now people can trust me and I can trust them.”

Of the 14 mothers who supported attending Crew Orientation, there was a variety in the type of support demonstrated. In two separate cases at Validus, the mother was so supportive of Crew Orientation that she sent the student without the father’s consent. In one case at Validus, and in two cases at Leaders, the students’ mothers wanted students to have experiences that were unavailable when parents were growing up. These same three students expressed few reservations about attending Crew Orientation in general, suggesting that the mother’s positive attitude correlates with a student’s positive attitude. One of these students, from Validus, described her mother’s attitude toward Crew Orientation: “Mom said I had to go. She packed my stuff for me, and told me she didn’t get to have these experiences when she was younger and so I should take advantage of the opportunity.” Again, it is worth noting that this student also expressed pride in completing Crew Orientation and satisfaction in the decision to attend.

Influence Two: Teachers

Teachers, primarily Crew Advisers, were another influence on student decisions to attend or not to attend Crew Orientation. At Validus, 5 out of 10 students expressed that their Crew Adviser was enthusiastic about Crew Orientation. At Leaders, 5 out of 8 students expressed that their Crew Adviser was enthusiastic about Crew Orientation. A student at Validus described her Crew Adviser as enthusiastic: “My crew adviser made me feel good about going—she said it was mad fun and didn’t give up trying to convince us.” Another student, from Leaders, described his Crew Adviser as saying “my crew adviser was happy and excited to go, and she made it seem fun so we all wanted to go.” In total, 10 out of 18 students from the focus groups described their Crew Adviser’s attitude as enthusiastic--and this enthusiastic attitude is clearly described as encouraging students to attend.

Among the 8 out of 18 Crew Advisers who were *not* described as enthusiastic about the trip, 7 out of 8 did not attend Crew Orientation at all. Their place was filled by a different teacher. A student from Leaders said, “My crew adviser didn’t go because she already went and didn’t want to go. We had a small crew and not everybody went.” This shows a possibility that the Crew Adviser’s negative attitude affected the crew, as not all students attended. This possibility is supported through other student quotes. As a second student from Validus described, “My crew teacher didn’t go either. It affected other students but not me, I wanted to go anyway.” And finally, a student from Leaders described his Crew Adviser: “My crew adviser didn’t go because she didn’t want to walk a lot. She’s the type of lady who wears heels a lot.”

While the Crew Adviser was not as strong of an influence as parents or peers, the Crew Adviser’s attitude does have an effect on student attitudes. These student quotes show that if a student is undecided about attending, the Crew Adviser’s attitude may be a factor in the student’s decision to attend.

Influence Three: Peers

Peers were a highly influential group factoring into a student’s decision to attend or not to attend Crew Orientation. When asked how students felt about Crew Orientation prior to attending, 3 out of 10 students from Validus and 3 out of 8 students from Leaders referenced their peers--including older brothers and sisters, and the Seniors from each institution.

Students from both schools described the Seniors as having a “positive” attitude about Crew Orientation. One student from Leaders described the high school seniors as “always saying ‘oh, remember when we did this on Crew Orientation?’ and laughing. They bonded and they were so positive about the experience.” Students from both Validus and Leaders were overwhelmingly swayed by older peers. During both focus groups, 100% of references to older students were encouraging of students attending Crew Orientation.

These older students recognized the discomforts of Crew Orientation. Three students mentioned older peers as complaining about no showers and cell phones, and about the amount of hiking. However, even these complaints were overshadowed by the older student's positive attitudes and support for attending Crew Orientation. As described in the Literature Review and reviews of NYCOBS programs, the vast majority of alumni are satisfied with programs and glad to have participated. This is supported by the focus groups, and may be a key to increasing student participation. As a student from Validus said "I was nervous my friends weren't going but the seniors convinced me, and it was totally worth it."

Throughout the focus groups, 3 influences were cited most frequently in impacting a student's decision: family, teachers, and peers. In finding a solution to the problem of low attendance during Crew Orientation, these are the three influences that have been identified and should be leveraged for communication. Family should be addressed, in recognition of potential language barriers; teachers should be addressed, as their attitude toward Crew Orientation may have a significant impact on students; and peers should be addressed, including older siblings, other high school students, and NYCOBS alumni.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Recommendations

In order to increase participation in Crew Orientation, it is necessary to overcome or circumvent the barriers to participation. The three main barriers identified were: concern for physical safety, concern for emotional safety, and language barriers.

NYCOBS takes many steps to ensure physical and emotional safety of participants in its courses. Field staff take part in extensive training which covers prevention of outdoor safety issues: including lightning emergency protocol, hydration, hypothermia/hyperthermia prevention, back-country hygiene, and wildlife concerns. In case of a physical safety concern, all field staff are required to maintain Wilderness First Aid and/or Wilderness First Responder certification, and a well-stocked first aid kit and cell phone are available at all times. In addition, an EMT is available 24/7 in base camp to visit or evacuate a student if needed. Hiring for field staff positions at NYCOBS are competitive, and field instructors are highly skilled outdoor professionals with experience in ensuring physical and emotional safety of participants. Field staff training covers emotional safety, including ensuring privacy for young women and men, tools for building a positive and collaborative atmosphere which ensures emotional security, and conflict resolution in case of interpersonal concerns amongst participants.

While NYCOBS devotes extensive training and resources to ensuring physical and emotional safety, the organization cannot entirely eliminate risks for participants. Risk management is key to the program's success--students must undertake risks in order to achieve personal growth, and field staff help mitigate and minimize risks while affording opportunities for adventure and challenge to participants. As observed during the focus groups, students who initially expressed concerns for emotional and physical safety on Crew Orientation later expressed satisfaction with

the decision to attend. From focus groups and from NYCOBS data and reports, as shown in Chapter Two: Literature Review, we know it is common for students to express initial trepidation and concern but feel that overall the outdoor education experience was valuable and worth facing these fears. The vast majority of students who attend Crew Orientation report feeling stronger and more capable as a result of the program, report having bonded with their Crew, and are glad to have attended.

Overcoming challenges and facing fears is integral to the Outward Bound model. While the organization uses effective risk management and mitigation to minimize actual risks for physical safety, each participant's perceived risk is part of the outdoor education experience that leads to personal growth. The organization may minimize actual risks for physical and emotional safety, but students must step out of their comfort zone to attend--which means accepting initial discomfort, concerns, and fears.

But how can NYCOBS communicate this difference between actual risk and perceived risk, and the value of perceived risk, to students and their families? How can the organization demonstrate the success rates and value of attending Crew Orientation in spite of initial fears and concerns? The answer is that communication between NYCOBS, partner schools, teachers and students/families must be improved in order to circumvent the barriers to participation in Crew Orientation and ultimately increase student participation in the program. Improvements in communication must take into account the language barriers with families from diverse backgrounds.

From the results of the focus groups, we know that family, teachers, and peers are highly influential in student decisions to attend or not attend Crew Orientation. This informs which groups should be targeted for improved communication regarding Crew Orientation.

Crew Advisers:

First is the question of teachers or Crew Advisers. As shown in the results, roughly 50% of students reported a Crew Adviser that was enthusiastic about attending Crew Orientation. Students also reported that their Crew Adviser's enthusiasm did affect decisions about whether or not to attend. As shown in Chapters 1 and 2, NYCOBS Expeditionary Learning schools consider Crew Orientation to be a fundamental part of the school culture.

It is vital that teachers at partner schools recognize the importance of this program, and communicate the importance to their students. Participation in Crew Orientation is one of the aspects of NYCOBS Expeditionary Learning schools that differentiates from other high schools in New York City. Teachers and Crew Advisers *must* accept participation and enthusiasm for Crew Orientation as part of their professional career.

The teachers and Crew Advisers interact with students daily, and have ample opportunity to encourage student participation in Crew Orientation. In fact, Crew Advisers may be the most efficient manner of communicating with students--there already exists a fixed time of day for Crew Advisers and students to interact on a regular basis. It is clear through the results of these focus groups that Crew Advisers who show enthusiasm about Crew Orientation impact the attitudes of their students. To repeat a quote from a student at Leaders, "my crew adviser was happy and excited to go, and she made it seem fun so we all wanted to go." By leveraging this existing infrastructure of daily Crew sessions for the purpose of increasing student participation in Crew Orientation, it is highly likely that Crew Advisers can make a positive impact on participation rates.

As in regard to any other topic, teachers are role models to young people and must recognize that responsibility with professionalism and grace. Of the many variables contributing to student participation rates in Crew Orientation, teacher attitudes are a variable over which NYCOBS has the most control; it is only acceptable for Crew Advisers to be enthusiastic and supportive of this valuable program.

Peers:

It is generally accepted that adolescents are highly susceptible to influence from their peers. The results of this research corroborate this finding, showing that older siblings, upperclassmen, and Crew Orientation alumni are some of the most influential advocates of Crew Orientation program. As shown through NYCOBS data in Chapter 2: Literature Review, Crew Orientation alumni have overwhelmingly positive things to say about their experiences. The focus groups give us the opportunity to hear how these older students are viewed--and we see that younger students envy the “bonding” experience that the upperclassman had; younger students want to have the same stories and bonding experience.

Moreover, the Crew Orientation alumni do not skirt issues and obstacles they experienced during the program. They are clear with the incoming students about no showers, no cell phones, and lots of hiking. They are honest about their own fears and concerns prior to attending Crew Orientation, and the value of confronting these fears and concerns. These alumni advocate attending Crew Orientation anyway, as it is worth the temporary discomforts in order to walk away feeling stronger, more resilient, and with a sense of community.

I urge NYCOBS to recognize this powerful strategy of alumni recruitment for Crew Orientation. Rather than trying to assuage or dispel students’ and families’ powerful concerns for emotional and physical safety, NYCOBS should leverage its upperclassmen to share their experiences with students and families. The upperclassmen validate fears and concerns of the family, but urge facing these fears in order to have an opportunity for growth and character development. This is a very honest approach to increasing student participation, which recognizes potential cultural barriers and aims to achieve a real sense of community.

In addition, upperclassmen at NYCOBS schools often come from similar backgrounds as underclassmen. They often live in the same communities and sometimes have relationships between families. Most important, upperclassmen may be the key to overcoming language

barriers. Many NYCOBS students and upperclassmen are raised bilingual: in English/Spanish, English/French, English/Wolof, English/Arabic, and more. These students are a treasure chest of resources for student recruitment.

I recommend NYCOBS schools to implement a systematic approach to involving Crew Orientation alumni for outreach and recruitment. These upperclassmen may be looking for an extra credit opportunity in school, or for an extracurricular activity that can contribute to their resume while applying to universities and jobs. NYCOBS schools can offer these incentives to alumni for the very real leadership position of recruitment and outreach. Rather than the NYCOBS Point Person trying to reach hundreds of families, the Point Person can oversee a team of student leaders who conduct recruitment to students and families. This will be a valuable leadership experience for the students, and a highly effective form of recruitment for Crew Orientation.

Communicating with Families

As stated above, leveraging Crew Orientation alumni is a powerful tool for communicating with students and their families. What are some specific strategies these alumni can use for communicating? Students can make phone calls home, write literature, create a video, and/or lead an Orientation Session for parents and families. If the school has an A/V club or a student with the ability to make a video for parents, the school could leverage this resource to create a school-specific video to share with families. These students should be rewarded for their work and leadership by academic credit and/or extracurricular acknowledgement.

Currently, NYCOBS provides a parent orientation session at each school in addition to written information sent home. These methods are efficient, but can be made more effective by systematically integrating upperclassmen and Crew Orientation alumni.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This project aimed to identify barriers to participation in NYCOBS's Crew Orientation program for urban high school students and to suggest strategies for increasing student participation.

Through focus groups with students at two of the participating schools, the main barriers identified included concerns for physical safety, concerns for emotional safety, and language barriers in communicating with families. NYCOBS takes extensive measures to minimizing emotional and physical risks to participants, but cannot eliminate risk entirely. In spite of risk and fears, students are overwhelmingly glad to participate in Crew Orientation and recognize the program's value. In order to effectively communicate the risk prevention measures taken, and the value of facing fears to achieve personal growth, NYCOBS should leverage the key influences to decision-making identified through focus groups: peers and Crew Orientation alumni, teachers, and families. It is imperative that teachers, who have extensive contact with students, encourage participation in Crew Orientation. This project also identified student peers and Crew Orientation alumni as a valuable and under-utilized resource in outreach to students and families. By systematic leveraging of highly influential peers and Crew Orientation alumni, NYCOBS can overcome language barriers to message honestly the value of overcoming fears and concerns in order to achieve personal growth.

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