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TEST OF A SHORT OUTWARD BOUND EXPERIENCE FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article is an empirical evaluation of an experiential learning program for college students. A group of 10 undergraduate students (7 male & 3 female) were treated with a 5-day Outward Bound experience in the Minnesota wilderness. Results showed that the program increased student's internal locus of control, but the overall impact of the program was relatively weak.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Management at Western Illinois University compliments its classroom education by offering an experiential learning course. A brief summary of the issues that were surfaced and resolved in the development of the course is available elsewhere (Naffziger, Fields, and Dobson, 1991). A qualitative description of students' experiences can also be found in a separate publication (Fields, Naffziger, and Dobson, in press). In short, we attempted to document whether a relatively brief outdoor experience could have a significant beneficial impact on students to justify its continued use.

METHOD

Subjects

The experimental group consisted of 10 undergraduate students who volunteered to go on the expedition. Prospective students were offered this opportunity through announcements made in various courses in the Department of Management. Colorful slides provided by the Outward Bound Organization were shown in classes and an advertisement was placed in the school newspaper advertising an upcoming informational presentation. The final group consisted of 6 business majors and 4 others majoring in the areas of mass communications, industrial technology, parks and recreation, and music merchandising.

Design

The experimental group was administered a battery of psychological instruments on the day of departure and again one week after their return. An independent sample was used as a comparison group. This sample was drawn from Principles of Management course. This was done to ensure that our experimental subjects were not somehow different from the student body in general at this institution.

Procedure

Comparison group data were collected on one occasion. Out of 114 surveys distributed, 41 (36%) were returned. Out of that, 33 (29%) were usable. This group consisted of 17 (52%) males, 11 (33%) females, and 5 (15%) that were indeterminate. This compares with the experimental group of 7 (70%) males and 3 (30%) females. Prior to their

departure, the experimental group received a set of 5 readings that presented a number of concepts useful to understanding group behavior. In an effort to enhance the outdoor experience, students were required to keep a written log of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the expedition. Upon their return, students used their log books to write a post-expedition paper describing in detail these thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

The treatment consisted of a weeklong Outward Bound expedition in Ely, Minnesota. This was a very fast moving, intensive experience that included activities such as wall climbing, trust building exercises, terrain map reading, survival training, strenuous canoeing, rock climbing, an elevated obstacle course, portaging, group development, and sensitivity training.

Hypotheses and Measures

Rotter's Locus of Control (1966) instrument was used to measure self-control. It was expected that subjects would exhibit a greater internal locus of control after the expedition (Cronbach's Alpha = .99). Managerial potential was measured with the Self-Descriptive index (Ghiselli, 1971). Subjects should become more decisive (Alpha = .92), motivated for achievement (Alpha = .88), and more self-actualized (Alpha = .71). Budner's (1962) Intolerance of Ambiguity Scale was used to measure this dimension (Alpha = .68). It was expected that subjects would be more tolerant of ambiguity after the expedition. Emotional sensitivity was measured with Christie's (1973) Machiavellianism Scale (Alpha = .96). It was expected that subjects would be more sensitive after the expedition. Leadership was measured with Fleishman's (1953) Leadership Opinion Questionnaire (Alpha = .99). It was expected that subjects would demonstrate greater leadership skills after the expedition. Self-confidence was measured with Berger's (1952) Self-Acceptance Scale (Alpha = .93). It was expected that subjects would be more confident after the expedition.

RESULTS

A positive impact would be evident by significant Changes in mean scores in the expected direction. To test for this, separate paired-comparison t-tests were performed comparing pre-and-posttest scores. Results showed that a significant change occurred only in the locus-of-control of subjects ($t = 3.67, p < .01$).

CONCLUSION

The finding that students attain greater internal control after an Outward Bound experience is consistent with earlier work by Marsh and Richards (1986). A possible explanation for the limited findings might be that experiential learning should be longer in duration to be impactful.

(Contact first author for references)