

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Adventures in Social and Emotional Learning: A Case Study of Voyageur Outward Bound School

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April 2014

The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

VOYAGEUR OUTWARD BOUND SCHOOL (VOBS)

Learning to see challenges as opportunities instead of roadblocks is not an easy task. It's easier for an individual who has a history of success in meeting previous challenges, support to seek out new challenges, and a mindset in which not immediately succeeding doesn't mean it's time to give up. In other words, challenges are more enticing to an individual who has strong social emotional learning skills.

The mission of Voyageur Outward Bound School (VOBS) is to change lives through challenge and discovery. In the process, the program also teaches social and emotional learning skills. VOBS uses experiential learning programs to introduce challenge and discovery, whether through daylong high ropes activities or 28-day canoe expeditions. VOBS programs are designed to help students realize that they can do more than they ever thought possible.

This issue brief presents a case study of Voyageur Outward Bound School, describing the program's goals, the skills it develops, and its structure and strategies. This brief also presents evidence of its effectiveness, through evaluation results and a youth participant's personal account.

Social and Emotional Learning refers to the process "through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging social situations constructively" (CASEL, 2014)¹. Increasingly, schools are focusing on teaching young people these non-academic skills alongside core subject matter, but opportunities for youth to learn and practice these skills in out-of-school settings are also important.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN ACTION

Voyageur Outward Bound School's hope is that students look back and discover that the trajectories of their lives changed after their course. They want their students to find they have better managed life's challenges and made better choices because of what they experienced and learned on their Outward Bound course. The program strives to demonstrate that through discovery of their strength of character,

ability to lead, and determination to serve their community, young people will become more resilient and help to shape a more compassionate world. Most importantly, the students find the confidence to empower themselves for the future they seek.

The competencies that Outward Bound students experience and gain align with social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. Language VOBS uses to describe the skills and attributes students gain includes self-confidence, resilience, problem solving, collaboration, compassion, effective communication, and social and environmental awareness. VOBS students discover that perseverance, grit, and determination lead to success through creativity and collaboration², and ultimately that they can achieve success by making choices that lead toward their dreams and goals.



Program components that promote and reinforce social and emotional learning

Students participate in programs ranging from 1-50+ days that are designed to help them discover and build the strength of their character, leadership skills, and an ethic of service. Voyager Outward Bound programs and expeditions are designed with a deliberate progression for students as they move toward new awareness of their capabilities:

- **Training phase: Knowledge = Success.** During this part of programming, students: 1) gain personal, interpersonal, and technical skills; 2) practice problem-solving and decision-making skills; and 3) experience natural consequences and rewards. During this phase on a typical 28-day canoe expedition, instructors focus on teaching navigation and backcountry camping skills, along with communication techniques and goal setting.
- **Main phase: Transfer Responsibility = Gained Confidence.** Instructors facilitate challenges for participants to: 1) face adversity; 2) experience successes and failures as learning opportunities with coaching and feedback; and 3) solve real problems using effective communication and conflict resolution skills. On a canoe expedition, students are given increased responsibility for daily activities, including travel, cooking, and maintaining a positive community within the group.
- **Final phase: Own It = Apply It.** Instructors recognize and affirm participants, resulting in increased: 1) responsibilities passed from instructors to students; 2) collaboration skills as the students create and move toward a common vision; and 3) application of mastery of skills to achieve personal and group goals. During the final phase of a canoe expedition, students become leaders who work together to scout travel routes, resolve conflicts, and complete their expedition.

Within this progression, there are many course components that promote social-emotional learning. For example, leadership rotation gives students specific roles that others depend on throughout the day (e.g., navigator, group journalist, leader of the day, cook, campsite manager). Other course components include sharing appreciations and ownerships during evening reflection, taking solo time to write about individual reflections and goals, specific technical skill development to move toward mastery, using group decisions to determine the number of miles they should paddle that day, and motivational interviews so instructors understand their students' starting points and how they want to grow and learn. All these components are intended to contribute to students' growth and success.

Program strategies that promote and reinforce social and emotional learning

All program staff are trained and mentored to move through a course design process using the Outward Bound educational framework. All VOBS programs are created with specific design principles that allow for a consistency in our programs, regardless of each program's uniqueness:

- **Learning through experience.** VOBS facilitates engaging, relevant, sequential experiences that promote skill mastery and incorporate reflection and transference.
- **Challenge and adventure.** VOBS uses familiar and unfamiliar settings to impel students into mentally, emotionally, and physically demanding experiences while managing appropriate risks.
- **Supportive environment.** VOBS designs experiences that support physical and emotional safety and develops a caring and positive group culture.

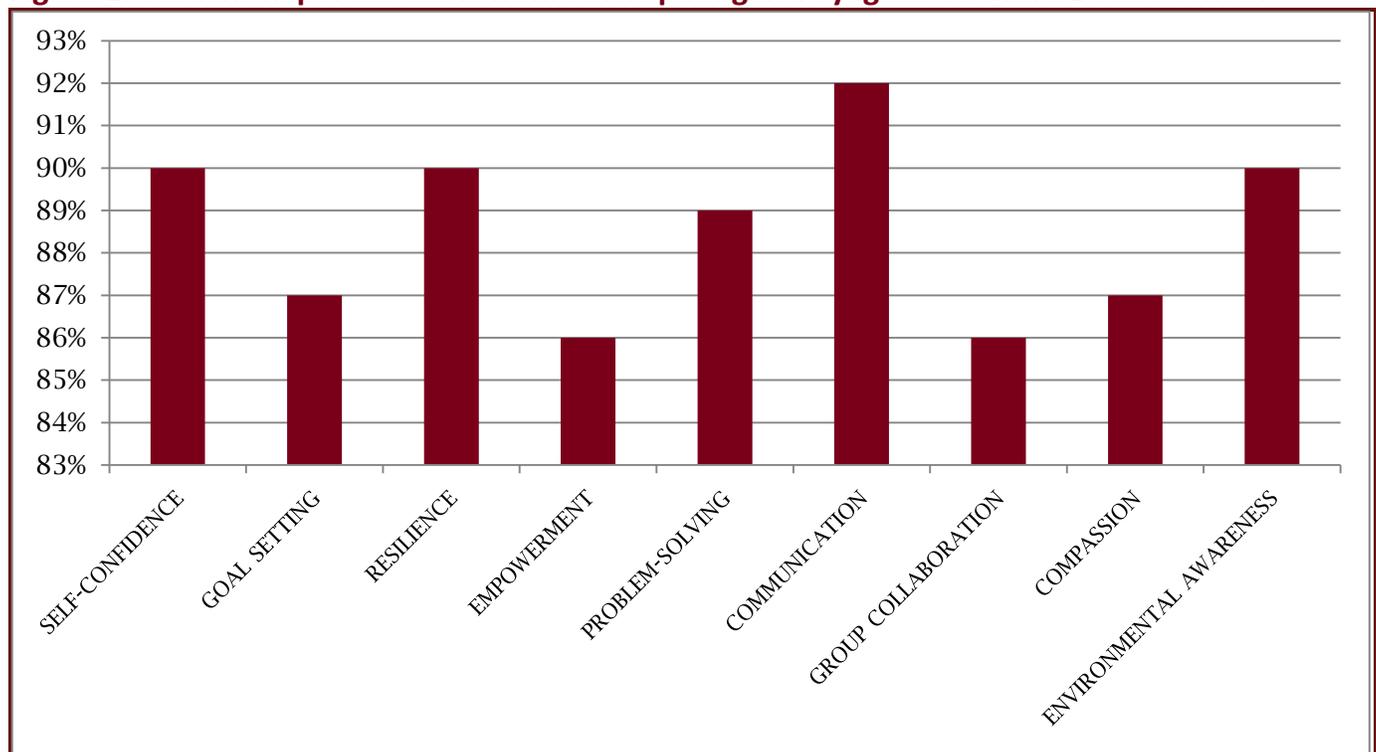
Lastly, program staff teach and work by these values: compassion, integrity, excellence, and inclusion.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

The Outward Bound Outcomes Instrument is used to evaluate outcomes of participating youth. OBOI is a validated survey developed by the national Outward Bound organization that includes nine measures. In a November 2012 evaluation of urban youth from River's Edge Academy³, students reported gains from participating in VOBS activities shown in figure 1.

As evidenced by evaluation outcomes as well as one participant's experiences with the program (see Firsthand Reflections), VOBS illustrates how building social emotional learning skills can occur through intentional structures and strategies in youth programming.

Figure 1. Student Reported Gains from Participating in Voyager Outward Bound School



FIRSTHAND REFLECTIONS

I am Chia Vang and a senior at River's Edge Academy. Our school has a partnership with Voyageur Outward Bound's program in the Twin Cities. I have had the opportunity to participate in expeditions and insight programs for two years. On our Outward Bound programs we canoed, backpacked, rock climbed, explored the city and many other things. I would like to tell you about the impact these programs have had as they have taught me about moving past obstacles and what it means to be a leader.

An obstacle that I overcame during one of our Outward Bound expeditions took place on my first hiking trip on the Superior Hiking Trail. I would have to say that my first hiking trip with my crew, which is all girls, was one of the hardest expeditions and I faced many, many obstacles. The obstacle that I overcame the most was my mental strength. Let me tell you, there were many, many times during the trip that I just wanted to throw my backpack down, sit down and close my eyes. While we were climbing a really steep hill, I was at a point of giving up. But as I turned around to see those who were behind me, and noticed they were also nearly at the point of giving up. I knew I couldn't give up! I thought, "If I give up, that means all I'm doing is letting my crew down." At that point I decided to set a positive example and spoke out to my peers to keep going and to keep pushing. I wanted to motivate them. After all the pushing, we reached the top for a water break, with all the girls up there, it felt like a huge accomplishment that we accomplished together. It made me realize that I overcame my weak inner voice by not letting it get the best of me and changing my obstacle into my strength - motivation.

If I go all the way back to the day that I first got on the bus for my first canoe expedition with Outward Bound, I remember it was a bit uncomfortable and scary because of an experience I had the summer before that fall trip. That summer I had an unsuccessful first canoe trip on the St. Croix River with my leadership summer camp, we got stranded because of high water and strong current. I remembered those moments perfectly and repetitively asked myself if this was really something that I want to do and face again. I nodded my head and said, if I don't get this trail experience, I will totally regret what I'm missing out on. I challenged myself to overcome my fear. I thought, "I must explore and persevere through whatever this is because it is two of five of our school's character values, if I represent my school, I must represent all the values; Honor, Honesty, Empathy, Exploration, and Perseverance." During the trip I noticed that the river we were canoeing, which is the Crow Wing River, wasn't as deep as I thought it would be. It made me feel glad and relieved that the water wasn't so high. Over the next 4 days, I realized my past experience was making me a stronger person.

I have been on three expeditions so far with Outward Bound. I cannot tell you how much I love it! I love it so, so much. Just as I said it earlier, all my past experience makes me a stronger person today. Each time I come back from a trip, I see my improvement in the things that I do. Just as you know, and as I learned, leaders lead by example, their actions speak their words. Therefore, I take from this experience my strong focus and mind for improvement.

Finally, I leave you all with the impact I know Outward Bound has made in my life. I now realize how much there is to me, how much I can give, the important bond of friendship, hardship, and love. Every experience here with Outward Bound, it will always stay with me and continue to be loved.

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¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2014), What is social and emotional learning?

² Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101

³ Voyageur Outward Bound School. (November 2012). A study of impact: Voyageur Outward Bound School and River's Edge Academy: A partnership for student advancement