

Learning Transfer in Socioeconomically Differentiated Outdoor Adventure Education Students

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Abstract

Background: The relevance of outdoor adventure education (OAE) programs to diverse participants has been questioned by numerous scholars. Limited research exists about similarities in learning outcomes across categories of difference such as race and socioeconomic status. **Purpose:** This study focused on understanding how learning outcomes differed between students who did and did not receive scholarships to attend an OAE program and whether students apply what they learn in OAE to their lives similarly. **Methodology/Approach:** Twenty-one students who enrolled on a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) course between 2010 and 2012 participated in semi-structured interviews 5 years after course completion. Half received scholarships. Participants were matched by course. **Findings/Conclusions:** Regardless of group, students reported learning comparable lessons and using what they learned in OAE similarly. What differed was the transfer context, meaning the conditions where students applied their learning. Scholarship students do vary demographically from non-scholarship students, but most students in both groups attended college during or after NOLS. This may explain why they applied their learning in similar ways. **Implications:** OAE practitioners can anticipate that most OAE students will learn the outcomes targeted through the program design and delivery regardless of scholarship status.

Keywords

socioeconomic status, learning outcomes, diversity, minority/underrepresented groups, wilderness settings

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Outdoor adventure education (OAE) practitioners have wrestled for decades with how to increase participation among people from a range of diverse demographic backgrounds (Warren, 2005; Warren, Roberts, Breunig, & Alvarez, 2014). Many potential participants find the cost of an OAE course offered by major providers such as National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and Outward Bound to be a barrier that prevents them from attending. A student who wants to take a 1-month backpacking trip offered by one of the major outdoor education organizations will pay upward of several thousand dollars, a price that does not include the cost of clothing and gear they need, and does not account for lost wages or a person's inability to help with household obligations while they are away. OAE programs use scholarships to reduce students' financial burden. Doing so has raised participation among students who are racial minorities, and those who have lower socioeconomic status (SES). But we know little about how students with these demographic backgrounds experience OAE because most OAE research has been conducted with students who are White and upper class (Holland, Powell, Thomsen, & Monz, 2018; Warren et al., 2014).

As OAE works to diversify its student population, practitioners will need to consider what they can realistically aspire to influence and what they cannot. Many scholars consider OAE to be a rich, developmental experience where students gain in a variety of ways from acquiring outdoor to inter- and intrapersonal skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Holland et al., 2018; Sibthorp, Paisley, Furman, & Gookin, 2008). While OAE courses can be made available to a wider range of participants by providing financial scholarships to interested students, the assumption that this is a good idea has been debated (cf. Rose & Paisley, 2012). Critics contend that OAE organizations risk indoctrinating participants with diverse backgrounds into a system of White privilege if they invite them on to courses without changing the underlying course structures that promote a White view of the world. Meanwhile, scholarship programs designed to support first-generation students in attending college employ OAE courses as part of a curriculum to "provide opportunities for high school students from low-income communities to overcome systemic inequities through mentoring and transformative experiences" (Summer Search, 2018). These conflicting perspectives have raised questions about what students with diverse backgrounds learn on OAE courses and how they transfer this learning into their lives.

Transfer of Learning

Much work on transfer of learning has supported the main drivers of transfer to include characteristics of the individual learner, the educational design and delivery, and the transfer context where the learning is subsequently applied (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin, & Schumann, 2011). Research shows that the most transferrable learning in OAE focuses on intra- and interpersonal skills; while students learn outdoor skills, they report them as being less useful over time (Sibthorp et al., 2008).

While individual learners are clearly central to learning and transfer, we know very little about the impact of individual characteristics on learning transfer in OAE given the demographic homogeneity of most research (Holland et al., 2018). Research on design and delivery of OAE programs consistently demonstrates that elements such as reflection, instructor support, experiential learning, and the social group are critical to learning transfer (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013). Efforts to better understand the transfer context has been investigated in the general transfer literature (e.g., Burke & Hutchins, 2007), and with intact groups (cf. Priest, 1996), but is otherwise typically addressed through acknowledging differences in individuals and their life circumstances years after course completion rather than as a prime driver of transfer (cf. Sibthorp et al., 2011).

While this view of transfer is pervasive in the education and training literature (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007), it is far from universal. Although some argue for learning as a process, for purpose of this study, we have chosen to define learning as the acquisition of knowledge, or as a product that the learner gains and can subsequently apply at a different time and place (Sfard, 1998).

Systems Theory and Transfer Context

As adolescents and young adults work to transfer their learning to their lives after an OAE course, understanding the transfer context becomes essential. Even for traditional (White, affluent) OAE participants, the transfer contexts remain complex and are diverse amalgamations of families, neighborhoods, communities, and cultures. As OAE practitioners work to diversify student populations, they need to better understand how targeted lessons are incorporated into the lives and contexts of students with diverse backgrounds.

Systems theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) posits that how a person applies learning is a function of both proximal (e.g., family) and distal (e.g., cultural) influences. A student who returns home from an OAE course to a family that actively encourages outdoor activity is more likely to apply their outdoor skills than a student who returns from their course without a proximal social system that supports outdoor pursuits. Likewise, neighborhood and community characteristics, such as access, and cultural values might either support or inhibit use of certain learning.

Building on Bronfenbrenner's approach, Spencer has proposed a phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST). This theory describes how individuals, especially individuals from diverse backgrounds and who do not clearly fit within dominant societal norms, operate in numerous interconnected and inseparable systems (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Spencer argues that characteristics of each individual work to shape their experiences in non-summative ways. Consider the range of contexts where OAE learning might be applied for a young female of color from an affluent neighborhood with a supportive family and access to education and the outdoors. Her learning might be used in similar ways to an elderly female of color or, conversely, to a young Caucasian man from a working class family without educational opportunities. However, the application context for learning may also differ

substantially and in ways we have not previously considered in OAE given its history of serving White, upper-class students (Holland et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2014).

Study Purpose

We conducted this study to see if differences emerged between students whose demographic backgrounds are commonly represented in OAE and those whose demographic backgrounds are not commonly represented in terms of what they learned and how they applied that learning in the 5-year period following their OAE course. We used scholarship status as a way to identify students who typically do not attend OAE, and include students with lower SES or who were racial minorities. Our expectation was that students would have different experiences with learning transfer based on scholarship status.

Method

To inform this study purpose, we interviewed 21 people who participated in NOLS courses between 2010 and 2012. NOLS is a major OAE provider, serving about 5,000 students in 2018, and teaches wilderness skills to small groups of students in back-country settings. Students' courses lasted between 16 and 30 days, and course types included hiking, sea kayaking, whitewater rafting, and horse-packing.

Half of the study participants enrolled through the Gateway partnership program and received scholarships from NOLS. The NOLS Gateway program provides full-tuition scholarships for "exceptional youth from under-resourced communities" (NOLS, personal communication, April 2018). Many of the Gateway partners included college pathway programs for underrepresented youth, including Summer Search, YES Prep, and Eastside College Prep, while another segment included conservation organizations such as the Student Conservation Association, Golden Gate National Park Conservancy, and Ironwood Tree Experience. Regardless of partner organization, NOLS offered scholarships as a means to increase representation of underserved populations at its school, and most scholarship recipients (but not all) are racial or ethnic minorities and of lower SES just as most scholarship non-recipients (but not all) are White and of higher SES. The other half of the study participants did not receive scholarships and were recruited from the same NOLS courses so that we could control (through our paired, within-course matches) variability in course design and delivery. For this study, students who received scholarships represented diverse perspectives in terms of race and SES whereas students who enrolled without scholarship support represented the typically White and higher SES students who attend NOLS courses. Trying to capture diverse perspectives and experiences in research is a complicated task that is at best an approximation (Shinew et al., 2006). Therefore, we use scholarship status as a proxy for diversity, although we recognize that it is an imperfect measure and readers should be careful about how they generalize our findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

In fall of 2016 and spring of 2017, we emailed and mailed letters to all students who received a scholarship from the NOLS Gateway program and enrolled on an open enrollment course between 2010 and 2012. Non-respondents received two reminder emails after the initial contact. We scheduled telephone interviews with participants who consented to be in the study. Telephone interviews were used due to logistical constraints involved in interviewing 21 people spread across the country. After interviewing a scholarship recipient, we emailed the students who did not receive scholarships who were on their course and interviewed the first student who consented to participate. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

All participants completed a semi-structured interview with the first author. Whereas a structured interview should keep the order and phrasing of questions consistent, a semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to deviate from the predetermined script to pursue relevant threads (Galletta, 2013). We based the nine open-ended questions and probes on an interview script from an earlier learning outcomes study (Sibthorp et al., 2008). Questions focused on how students described their experience and its impact, what they learned and how they have used what they learned, what they would tell their home community about their experience, how they felt about group composition, and how their courses affected their college or career experience. Interviews averaged 40 min. We did not inform participants that we wanted to know how their experience differed based on scholarship status to see whether variations naturally emerged.

Two researchers independently read and coded each transcript, treating each interview as the unit of analysis. Using initial, axial, and selective coding (e.g., Saldaña, 2009), we created summary themes and compared them to codes and themes developed from the previous study on learning outcomes from NOLS (Sibthorp et al., 2008). This method allowed new codes to emerge from the data while also enabling us to assess the findings in relation to existing literature. We compared findings by matched cases to look for differences, and met to discuss and resolve any discrepancies.

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research is interpreted through the researcher, making it important to know how their positionality might affect the findings (Ball, 1990). All researchers in this study have worked as professionals in the outdoor education industry, including working for NOLS. Their significant experience in the field enhances their credibility by bringing an insider, emic perspective to the data (Patton, 1999). On the contrary, it also means that their insight is likely biased by preexisting beliefs about the nature of outdoor education. The researchers are White, have higher SES, and believe that outdoor education can provide positive, lasting value and important learning outcomes for at least some participants.

Institutional review board (IRB)

This study was reviewed and approved by the IRB at the University of Utah. All participants received a consent form electronically and acknowledged consent to have their interviews recorded.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand what students from different demographic backgrounds reported learning while on a NOLS course and using in their lives afterward, and to see what differences emerged between how students described their learning. Participants were interviewed roughly 5 years after their course so that they could speak to what lessons remained most salient over time. Table 1 provides participant demographics and information about their pre- and post-course wilderness experience.

Our general findings showed that while students had different experiences that could be attributed to their scholarship status, they spoke about similar learning outcomes (defined as statements that described the skills or knowledge a participant said they learned at NOLS) and having applied what they learned in similar sites (such as college or work) after NOLS. For example, students commonly reported relationship skills as a learning outcome and described using relationship skills at college. In this way, their learning and learning application site were similar regardless of scholarship status. However, the context of the site where they applied what they learned differed by scholarship status. Some scholarship recipients spoke about being the only or one of a few racial minorities at NOLS and how that prepared them for future scenarios, such as college, where they again were one of a small group of racial minorities. Scholarship non-recipients also spoke about appreciation for different perspectives, but not in the context of being a member of a minority group; rather, they realized that other perspectives existed.

Transferable Learning Outcomes

Student learning in this study mirrored what Sibthorp et al. (2008) found. The outcomes fell into one of the same three categories: technical skills, group dynamics and development, and self-systems (such as their individual strengths and weaknesses, what they did or did not like, or how to regulate emotions under difficult conditions). All students said they learned outdoor skills. On the contrary, they found inter- and intrapersonal skills most applicable to life after NOLS and related them to academic and professional contexts. They reported learning leadership skills, how to speak up in moments that previously made them nervous, how to quickly build intimate friendships, and how to find common ground with people who shared different beliefs than they did.

While student answers in Table 2 are clearly different, we would say both students learned intrapersonal or self-system skills. In this case, the scholarship non-recipient identified outdoor skills as an outcome whereas the scholarship recipient did not. But

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

	Scholarship recipients (n = 10)	Scholarship non-recipients (n = 11)
Age in years		
Mean	19.3	21.3
Median	17.3	17.8
Range	15.8-41.5	15-51
Gender		
Male	5	6
Female	5	5
Race		
Black	2	0
Hispanic/Latino	1	0
Multiracial	5	0
Other	0	1
Unknown	1	2
White	1	8
Why attended NOLS ^a		
Familial recommendation	1	7
Friend recommendation	3	2
Scholarship program	10	0
Other	0	1
No particular reason	0	4
Prior wilderness ^b experience ^a		
None	4	4
1-3 trips	3	4
4+ trips	2	2
Car camping	3	2
Post-NOLS Wilderness Experience ^a		
None	5	2
1-3 trips	1	1
4+ trips	4	6
Wanted to but prevented by barriers (e.g., financial, distance from backcountry, time)	3	2
College		
Four-year college	10	8
Technical college	0	1
Graduated prior to NOLS	0	2

Note. NOLS = National Outdoor Leadership School.

^aParticipants could fall into multiple categories (e.g., having gone on no wilderness trips but having gone car camping, or having taken no additional wilderness trips but wanting to go on more).

^bWilderness trips were defined as occurring in a remote area, away from roads, buildings, and phones for at least two days in length.

Table 2. Examples of Student Learning Outcomes by Scholarship Status.

Scholarship recipient	Scholarship non-recipient
<p>PARTICIPANT: Learning how to open up to people that I didn't meet previously or didn't know beforehand, and just learning how to be my own adult. I never lived away from my family for so long, I've never traveled on my own. I've never had that experience completely on my own. There's still a lot more things I have to learn to be an adult. I know that now, but just the aspect of self-growth on my own was something I felt like I learned a lot on the trip.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT: Technical skills I still carry with me are map reading, route planning, orienteering and a few other minor technical skills that go along with backcountry backpacking. More intangible things, I'd say conflict resolution was a big one and being able to settle issues that may arise amongst the group in a reasonably peaceful manner and being able to facilitate conversations that resolves issues through a middle ground that can lead both parties to satisfaction.</p>

findings like this switched between matched cases, indicating that scholarship status did not affect whether a participant said they learned, for example, outdoor skills. We found no themes in learning outcomes that were exclusive to scholarship recipients or non-recipients. Again, this does not mean there were no differences between students based on scholarship status, but rather that they described having gained similar learning outcomes.

Application of Learning in Transfer Context

We found mixed evidence when comparing how students applied what they learned at NOLS to their lives afterward. On one hand, they said they applied what they learned in similar ways and where they applied what they learned was also similar. For example, regardless of scholarship status, students described taking the lessons they said they learned at NOLS, such as conflict resolution, and applying them to future academic or professional pursuits. The lessons students most commonly discussed dealt with relationship or interpersonal skills, and persistence or intrapersonal skills, both of which were described in the context of college or work (see Table 3).

Students in both scholarship groups reported learning outdoor skills, but whether they proved useful over time depended on whether the student continued to engage in outdoor recreation. There were students in both scholarship groups who had previous wilderness recreation experiences and those who had none. Scholarship recipients who had previous wilderness experience typically received their scholarship through an outdoor recreation club or conservation organization whereas scholarship non-recipients typically engaged in outdoor recreation with their families. Whether a student used their outdoor skills depended not so much on their scholarship status as on their experiences prior to NOLS.

Table 3. Examples of Application of Learning in Transfer Context by Scholarship Status.

Scholarship recipient	Scholarship non-recipient
<p>INTERVIEWER: Have you ever used what you learned on your NOLS course as part of your life?</p> <p>PARTICIPANT: Yeah, for my senior year. That was . . . one of the most difficult times in my life because this is the time I was applying to college. There was a lot of times where I was like, oh, I don't know if I can go to this college because my parents can't afford it or I can't do this. And, so, there was a lot of discouragement but this is where I had to really tap into the experience I had [at NOLS] and I said to myself there are a lot of things a lot of difficult things I've done in my life and this is just a bump in the road . . . the NOLS trip just helped me think back to the times that yes . . . I can surpass a challenge and still be able to be successful.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT: It's this attitude of knowing that I can accomplish what I need to accomplish . . . There are some challenges that I know I can overcome with my NOLS experiences, and then there are some that I feel they did not prepare for. I'm okay understanding that NOLS did not prepare me to write a five-page paper. But NOLS did prepare me . . . to have, like, the stubbornness and mind-set to be able to accomplish other great things. . . . It's an attitude to all things that I can apply.</p>

Note. NOLS = National Outdoor Leadership School.

What differed meaningfully by scholarship status was how students described their position within the application context. The responses in Table 4 both describe two students who are wrestling with being independent at college, but in very different ways. The scholarship recipient describes being the first generation in her family to attend college and having few family members who could answer her questions about the choices she needed to make whereas the scholarship non-recipient primarily discusses how to manage specific tasks related to being on his own. Thus, while we might say they learned similar lessons and applied them in similar ways, their experiences within that particular context were not the same and were heavily influenced by their positions in the world.

Design and Delivery of the Course

While we were not specifically focused on design and delivery mechanisms in this study, the mechanisms identified were generally supportive of past findings, including learning through direct experience, instructors, other students, reflection, and being given opportunities to make real decisions with consequences. As with previous OAE research specific, the remoteness of the program remained a catalyst for learning. In addition to the microcosm created by the physical remoteness, this cohort of students did note the disconnections from technology as important to learning (see Table 5). At home, they reached out to friends via their devices in down time; at NOLS, they had only themselves and the people with them.

Table 4. Examples of Transfer Context by Scholarship Status.

Scholarship recipient	Scholarship non-recipient
<p>PARTICIPANT: I learned . . . to utilize my resources but I don't think I would have really . . . learned that lesson if it wasn't for NOLS because in NOLS, our instructors were always telling us if we had a question, ask them for help, so that's what I . . . took, that initiative throughout college because I had no one, and no one in my family in particular to turn to. Like . . . what's the next step, how do I know what I'm choosing is the right thing for my career, so that's . . . one of the greatest things that I learned from NOLS. And like, I said, building those relationships. I took that even a step further in college. I got a lot of help from different mentors throughout college. I don't think I would have learned those lessons without NOLS.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT: I mean, when you go to college, you're on your own, you have to cook for yourself and do whatever and clean your room or do your laundry and I think the NOLS experience made all that a lot easier and just being on your own.</p>

Note. NOLS = National Outdoor Leadership School.

Table 5. Example of Participant Descriptions of the Microcosm by Scholarship Status.

Scholarship recipient	Scholarship non-recipient
<p>PARTICIPANT: I felt like I got to know some of those group members that were on my trip more so than I knew my friends at the time, just because I was around them for 30 straight days, and . . . there were no distractions to keep us from really getting to know each other and delving deep down</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT: It's just such a remarkable classroom . . . you take out all the other distractions and it's just you with that group of people and . . . that just provides a lot more clarity around the lessons that you're learning.</p>

The other students on OAE courses are typically described as important to learning transferable lessons, and our results also support this. However, given the demographic diversity of our study participants and the ongoing dialog regarding how to best integrate socioeconomically and racially diverse students on OAE courses (Paisley et al., 2017), we directly asked study participants about the value of their group's composition. The study participants universally valued their student peers as drivers of learning, even while commenting on the challenges of having to accommodate diverse opinions, expectations, and abilities (see Table 6). The exception to this finding revolved around age. In two cases, a course had a participant that was on average 20 years older than other students. The older students said they gained less through the experience, and that often they were unable to work on their goals of focusing on technical skills because of the amount of time spent on group dynamics. They thought they grasped group dynamics reasonably well prior to attending NOLS. In addition, students who had recently graduated from college and attended a course with students who had just graduated from high school reported that the age difference was sometimes difficult.

Table 6. Example of Participant Opinions About Group Composition.

Scholarship recipient	Scholarship non-recipient
<p>PARTICIPANT: I prefer it to be the same because as much as . . . it wasn't a perfect experience for me because I was, in a way, slightly ostracized by my cohort, it was also a learning experience for me because I was surrounded by very, very liberal people or very diverse people and liberal people in [my hometown]. And I was kind of spoiled by that . . . but I think it's also a good experience for me, for anyone, to experience something new and something different and later on, I was able to connect with [the other students] and get to know them and I ended up—I ended up—well, one of the students that attended [my course] was also from [my hometown] so I ended up with her afterwards, and bonded throughout with her, and she lives in a really, really affluent part [my hometown]. They're very, very rich over there and so it was . . . a different experience and I was able to see, to meet this person in her community and like—I don't know how to explain it. But it's good to get different perspectives and so, I think, it's good to just have that blend and people, humans, in general are resilient and . . . I ended up becoming friends with these people . . . that I was having a hard time connecting with in the beginning.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT: I definitely think that the diversity at NOLS . . . is one of the key elements of NOLS that makes it a pretty unique experience because if I had been with people that I was comfortable with or people that I knew and we just decided to do this course together, then I wouldn't have grown . . . in the ways that I did because it was through these interactions with these people that it was a pretty big experience in our group. We had a 15 year old all the way up to a 28-year-old and so a pretty wide age difference, which went to a pretty wide range of life experiences and viewpoints.</p> <p>I think that that's one of the pretty wonderful things about NOLS is that they really do get this pretty varying group of people together to work and live together for a month and to be successful. Sure, there is always some groups that have some drama and butt heads a little bit, but I think you would be a pretty hard pressed to find a group that hadn't learned something by the end from each other. Maybe they aren't best friends by the end of it but I think that's okay and I don't think that NOLS is looking for that necessarily but . . . yeah, I think it's a good thing, the diversity that they have within their trips.</p>

Note. NOLS = National Outdoor Leadership School.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to understand whether students with different demographic backgrounds realized comparable learning outcomes from an OAE course and to understand how these students applied what they learned to their lives in the 5-year period following their course. We asked these questions to tackle some of the complex issues related to bringing students with diverse backgrounds into a domain that has been historically populated by White, affluent, able-bodied, and male students (Warren et al., 2014), and to understand how their varying positions within an ecological system would influence their learning. Scholarships are one way that students with diverse backgrounds enter into OAE, and many are linked to programs that provide support to under-resourced youth to help them overcome systematic disadvantages. These

programs intentionally select OAE as a tool that can help students; therefore, we focused on learning outcomes and application to understand how OAE serves these students.

We looked at the influence of scholarship status by interviewing matched pairs of students who attended the same course, one of whom received a scholarship to attend and one of whom paid the full tuition. They typically came from different social systems, entered into the same system for the duration of their course, and returned to their different systems. We found that students reported comparable learning outcomes and application of learning outcomes at similar sites regardless of scholarship status. While we did find differences at the individual level, we did not find that scholarship status was related to different patterns in how either group answered our questions. This is not to say that students had the same experiences. Scholarship recipients were more likely to be racial minorities than students who did not receive scholarships, and race emerged as a theme within their interviews. Similarly, scholarship non-recipients spoke about privilege and how their NOLS experience—and sometimes, specifically their experience with a scholarship recipient—shaped their awareness of their own privilege. But again, our study focused on specific questions about learning and application of learning, which appeared similar across the two student groups despite the fact that we expected to see differences.

What students in both interview groups said they learned matched previous literature on learning outcomes in OAE (Hattie et al., 1997; Holland et al., 2018; Paisley, Furman, Sibthorp, & Gookin, 2008). Students most commonly reported learning outdoor skills, and intra- and interpersonal outcomes. The findings support the commonly held idea that OAE can be a powerful environment for social and emotional learning (Richmond, Sibthorp, Gookin, Annarella, & Ferri, 2018), which is consequently linked to college and career success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). This assumption underlies the use of OAE in many scholarship programs, and our findings offer evidence that OAE is functioning the way scholarship programs intend. In addition, the results supported previous work on learning mechanisms (Rose, Paisley, Sibthorp, Furman, & Gookin, 2010). One new theme emerged related to technology. Students spoke about being disconnected from the ability to electronically reach out to their friends or seek avenues to relieve their anxiety or boredom while in the backcountry. This seems primarily related to the increase in smartphones and other electronic devices over the last decade.

How students applied what they learned at NOLS to their lives in the 5 years afterward also sounded similar regardless of scholarship status. This was the most surprising finding given that we hypothesized that the matched sets of participants would apply their learning in different transfer contexts. This hypothesis was only partially correct. All students interviewed had already graduated from college, were presently in college, or attended college after NOLS. They spoke about NOLS giving them skills that prepared them for challenges they encountered in college or in their professional lives afterward. While this finding did not vary in a meaningful way between student groups, the details of the context differed. Scholarship recipients referenced being a racial minority in college or being a first-generation college student, and talked about

the challenges this presented. Scholarship non-recipients more commonly spoke about gaining maturity and awareness of their privileges.

Given our systems perspective and understanding the interconnected influences on individual learners (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer et al., 1997), we anticipated that the application of learning would be different between scholarship recipients and non-recipients. SES has a significant impact on how people's lives unfold; people with lower SES typically face more challenges rooted in systematic oppression than people with higher SES. Lower SES is related to lower educational attainment, and worse physical and mental health outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2018). Their communities typically have less financially based resources to offer residents. Youth with equal aptitude end up having access to very different opportunities that impact how their lives unfold. Given criticism in the OAE literature about the relevance and utility of OAE for students from diverse backgrounds, we thought there would be more differences in what students said they learned from NOLS and how they said they applied these lessons to their lives afterward.

In retrospect, despite student differences, the OAE design and delivery (curriculum) drove the learning. In the case of NOLS, its curriculum focuses on outdoor skills, leadership, confidence, and functioning under difficult circumstances (NOLS, 2016), which aligns with what students in the study reported. During the interviews, it at times seemed that students wanted to produce the "right" answer and their language was very similar to what NOLS purports to teach (e.g., a student saying they learned tolerance for adversity). They reported similar learning mechanisms, which, again, might be expected given that NOLS courses have similar core curricula for all students on a course. We also expected more variation in student transfer contexts after NOLS, but again, most students attended NOLS, then enrolled at college, and, at the time that we interviewed them, had started their first post college jobs. While lower SES is related to lower college enrollment, many scholarship recipients were enrolled in a program specifically designed to help them attend college, which may account for the similar learning contexts. We asked them how they used what they learned at NOLS, and students in both scholarship groups said they used it at college or in their jobs—in other words, in similar contexts. However, the contexts were not identical and some differences did seem related to their scholarship status. Future studies could examine how students apply what they learn to their lives with more depth to understand the unique challenges that students who receive scholarships face and how their OAE experience does (or does not) help them overcome those challenges.

Limitations

We employed a retrospective design, which is limited by recall bias (Berney & Blane, 1997). We interviewed students on average 5 years after their course concluded, which means they have likely forgotten many aspects of what they may have learned and even how they used what they learned in their lives. The study is limited in the fact that scholarship status is at best an approximation of diversity. It is further complicated by the fact that students underwent a nomination process to receive

their scholarship, meaning that they represent a particular group of students who were identified as a fit for a NOLS course. If we want to understand the experience of students with diverse backgrounds, we need more research on more different types of students. How they experience OAE is ultimately a very large question, and this study focused in on one very narrow piece of it: what do students learn and how do they use what they learn. The goal of the study was not to dissect the differences within their experience, which is a worthy question that could be pursued. Finally, all participants reported NOLS had a generally positive impact on them, which indicates our sample may be skewed toward participants who enjoyed their experiences. That said, two scholarship recipients did share aspects of the course that negatively impacted them, indicating that at least some participants felt comfortable sharing less optimal experiences.

Implications

The results of this study support the premise that OAE can be effective for students from a variety of demographic backgrounds and that scholarship providers who value the most common outcomes of OAE programs can have confidence that the curricula can be effective for their selected students. This appears to be a function of aligning student needs to the program's design and delivery, which often remains unchanged for student groups that have one or two scholarship students in attendance. In this case, OAE program administrators can plan on students gaining similar outcomes, regardless of scholarship status. These findings, however, add another layer of nuance as the field of OAE considers how to best integrate students with diverse backgrounds on to courses, and invites more inquiry into understanding the complex nature of making OAE a welcoming space for people with diverse backgrounds.

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