Leaders Unplugged: An Outdoor Leadership Experience

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Backpacking and leadership development are two of my passions. I wanted to create an opportunity where the two come together. Thus, the concept of Leaders Unplugged was conceived. This five-day, twenty-three-mile backpacking adventure will provide students with an opportunity to push themselves as leaders and as people.

Student leaders have to learn how to balance their academics, jobs, student leadership roles and life. In all the craziness of this, most students take very little time to reflect on what they are learning through their experiences. Student Activities and Leadership Programs currently offers three opportunities where students take two days away from campus to focus on their leadership skills: Spring and Fall Leadership Retreats and the RSO Leadership Conference. Students tell us that they enjoy the opportunities to leave campus and distractions behind for that time. Additionally, several of our programs have components that physically challenge students—whether through a low or high ropes or leadership reaction course. These components are frequently cited as the most memorable and impactful parts of the event for participants.

As an avid backpacker, I know the personal growth that can occur through disconnecting from society and pushing one’s physical limits for several days. Whether a weekend trip or a six-month adventure, backpacking can give the opportunity to a hiker to turn off his/her electronic devices, disengage from distractions and challenge oneself in ways that aren’t normally encountered in day-to-day life. Additionally, such excursions can offer unique opportunities for critical-thinking and problem-solving that don’t exist for students in campus life.

**Background**

**Planning Process**

**Step 1: Research**

**Similar Trips**

There are quite a few universities and colleges that offer outdoor excursions, but most are through an outdoor recreational department in Student Life. Western Michigan University (WMU) does not have such a program. Other institutions offer outdoor excursion options for the first-year students “full welcome experiences.” Initial research was unable to find any on-campus outdoor excursions that had a focus on leadership. However, several instructors were found on WMU’s campus who have done backpacking/camping trips in a for-credit course setting. These instructors were interviewed on their trip’s logistics, experiences, etc.

**Interest**

Gauging students’ interest in such a trip was also an important part of the research. When the trip was explained, the majority of the responses followed the vein of, “How and when can I sign up?” In fact, the responses were so positive, we are preparing to have more interested parties than available spots.

**Step 2: Financial Support**

Before moving forward, it was important to determine whether there would be financial support from Student Activities and Leadership Programs. The preference was not to charge students for the full cost of the trip. Having financial support from Student Assessment Fee monies would allow students’ costs to be subsidized. The project was approved and thus made it possible to have the registration fee for the trip set at $25 per student. This fee will cover transportation and some of the costs for backpacking gear. Students will be responsible for their own food and some of the necessary gear for the excursion.

**Step 3: Logistics**

Dates, location, length of hike, program calendar, liability, etc. were all issues that had to be dealt with next.

**Dates**

Possible dates included over Winter Recess, Spring break or the week between Spring semester and Summer I. Winter Recess and Spring break trips would require the trip to take place in the south further away from campus due to weather. This would increase the cost of the trip, as well as complicate any reconnaissance required. It was determined that the week between Spring semester and Summer I would be ideal.

**Location**

Based on the timing of the trip, Michigan became an option. After discussion around the desired length and mileage of the trip, several trails were explored. The trail that was determined is a loop of 23 miles along the Manistee River in the Manistee National Forest. The loop is made up of the Manistee River Trail and a portion of the North Country Trail. I have hiked this particular loop many times so am familiar with the area.

**Liability Issues**

In meetings leading up to the trip, we will be reviewing with participants what is appropriate gear for the trip, how to cook on camp stoves, how to treat water, and cover “what to expect” items. This should help prepare participants appropriately to prevent foreseeable risks.

Additionally, we are in the process of working with Legal Affairs to get an appropriate waiver for participants to reduce WMU’s liability.

**Learning Outcomes and Rubric**

The Student Activities and Leadership Programs Leadership Curriculum has identified six areas and twenty-three sub-areas as the learning outcomes of the culmination of all programs. From these outcomes, I have identified nine that students will have grown in through participating in Leaders Unplugged. They are as follows:

- Problem Solving
- Assess Problems
- Identify Solutions
- Engages in Critical Thinking
- Implement Solutions
- Evaluate Outcomes
- Teamwork
- Fosters Constructive Team Climate
- Responds to Conflict
- Personal Leadership
- Self-Awareness
- Reflection

**Our Route**

On the east side of the river lies the Manistee River Trail, on the west side a portion of the North Country Trail (NCT). Together those trails can be combined into a 23-mile loop that has become one of the most popular backpacking treks in Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. The crucial link between the two trails is a 245 feet suspension bridge that spans the Manistee River just below Hodonyi Dam. The foot bridge, the largest wooden suspension bridge in the Lower Peninsula, serves as the cornerstone for a scenic route through a variety of terrain that features numerous viewing points.

The bridge also units two completely different trails. The 8.5-mile segment of the North Country Trail (NCT) is an up-and-down climb across the rugged ridges that dominate the west side of the river. Several times, particularly in early spring and late fall, hikers are treated to sweeping views that include a large slice of the valley to the east. The Manistee River Trail is a level and easy hike that skirts the river bluff providing backpackers numerous opportunities to gaze down at the Manistee flowing through horseshoe bends.

**The Trip**

The actual trip will be a combination of backpacking, leadership activities and basic wilderness survival skills. We will be hiking 3-5 miles each day, which should leave significant amounts of time to set up camp for the day and to engage in activities in the evenings.

Each participant will have the opportunity to be one of the “Leaders of the Day” to make decisions throughout the day including, but not limited to: making and breaking camp, when to take breaks, which way to go (this trail is not always well marked), dealing with conflict, etc. Leaders of the Day will be provided support from the co-facilitators.

Evening activities will focus on reflection on the day’s events, as well as personal leadership issues.

**2012-2013 Program Timeline**

- **October/November**
  - Promotion of Program Registration Open
- **November 12**
  - Registration Closes
- **November 26-December 7**
  - Interviews (if necessary)
- **December 10**
  - Participants Announced
- **January**
  - Introductory Meeting
- **February**
  - Second Meeting
- **Late March/Early April**
  - Teambuilding Day
- **April 28-May 2**
  - Actual Trip

**Contact Information**

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