This study compares outcomes associated with participation in Outward Bound (OB) and National Outdoor Leadership Schools (NOLS) courses in the United States. OB and NOLS (two of the largest providers of outdoor adventure education [OAE] courses) combined saw more than 30,000 students in 2006 (NOLS, n.d.; Outward Bound, n.d.). Comparing these two respected outdoor adventure education programs may assist programmers and leaders to adapt programming to specific needs and achieve specific outcomes. The comparison will also help eliminate the common perception that these two organizations vary in the types of programs offered and the outcomes participants obtain. The study was conducted in the summer of 2006 and used means-end theory to analyze the 510 subjects’ responses.

**Review of Literature**

“Outdoor education is education ‘in’, ‘about’, and ‘for’ the out-of-doors” (Ford, 1981, p. 12). Many studies have documented outcomes associated with outdoor education programs such as leadership, self-concept, academic, personality, interpersonal, and becoming more adventurous (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997), but few have compared outcomes from OB and NOLS.

Means-end theory was developed by Gutman (1982) as a method of analyzing factors that drive consumer purchasing behavior. Means-end
theory links the physical objects or services (the means), with the outcomes and the personal values of the individual (the ends) (Klenosky, Frauman, Norman, & Gengler, 1998). The theory focuses on the interrelationship among attributes, consequences, and values at three levels of abstraction. Means-end theory has justifiable application to outdoor recreation such as understanding the outcomes associated with ropes course programming (Goldenberg, Klenosky, O’Leary, & Templin, 2000; Haras, Bunting, & Witt, 2006) and examining the components of an outdoor experience (Goldenberg, McAvoy, & Klenosky, 2005; McAvoy, Holman, Goldenberg, & Klenosky, 2006).

Methodology

Subjects were selected using a convenience sampling method utilizing a semistructured interview. Subjects were asked to identify what components of the course were most meaningful to them. For each component, the subjects were first asked “Why is (component #1) important to you.” The researcher then asked the subject, “Why is (answer #1) important to you,” and then “Why is (answer #2) important to you,” until the subject could no longer associate reasons with the current outcome being discussed. Ladders were coded and entered into a data-processing computer program known as LadderMap (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995). While entering the ladders, content codes were developed to categorize the responses by keywords and recurring phrases. Responses were then tested for reliability and an implication matrix was developed. The final step in the data analysis was the development of hierarchical value maps (HVMs). (HVMs are visual representations of the themes emerging from the data in the implication matrix.)

Results

Data were collected from 162 OB students and 348 NOLS students. The most frequently mentioned attributes for NOLS were group (34%), expeditioning (23%), and climbing (33%). The most frequently mentioned attributes for OB were group (56%), expeditioning (45%), and hiking to the peak (35%). The most frequently mentioned consequences for NOLS were skill development (53%), interactions (47%), and new experience (40%). The most frequently mentioned consequences for OB were interaction (51%), awareness (47%), personal challenges (44%), new perspective (44%), and new experience (43%). Despite subtle differences in program structures, participants from both organizations cited many of the same program attributes and consequences. Values obtained were also similar for both organizations. Top OB values included warm relationships with others (22%), self-confidence (28%), sense of accomplishment
Data from this study suggest that a significant component of both OB and NOLS programs are related to the group experience. The most frequently mentioned attribute for both was “group,” while “interactions” was the most frequently mentioned consequence for OB and the second most frequently mentioned for NOLS. Additionally both mentioned “warm relationships with others” under values gained from the experience. For OB, the attribute “group” had a strong link to the consequence of “fun.” For NOLS, the attribute “group” had a solid link to the consequence “new experience.”

Specific themes did vary between the HVMs. For OB participants, strenuous activities (hiking to peak, solo, climbing) had strong links to the consequence “new experience.” “New experience” had a strong link to the consequence “skill development,” which had a strong link to the value “life improvement,” and a solid link to the value “sense of accomplishment.” From this data we can conclude that strenuous, challenging activities in an OB program lead participants to a better understanding of important human values. For NOLS participants, strenuous activities (climbing, expeditioning, hiking to peak) had strong links to consequences like “trust,” “new experience,” and “independence,” but did not have direct links to important values. For NOLS, attributes of “leadership,” “instructors,” and “overall course” had links to the consequence of “skill development,” which had a strong link to the consequence of “interactions,” which in turn had a strong link to the consequence of “new friendships,” ultimately leading to “warm relationships with others.” From this data we can conclude that NOLS students place less of an emphasis on strenuous, challenge-based activities and more emphasis on interpersonal-relationship and skill-development activities. This assertion is reaffirmed by Kellert (1998) who states major differences exist, however, in emphasis and philosophy—OB tends to focus more on challenge-oriented activities and NOLS places greater emphasis on leadership skills and interpersonal relationships.

**Discussion**

The results from this study indicated many similarities in the outcomes between NOLS and OB. Strenuous activities had a strong link to group interactions and bonding through shared challenges faced by the group, leading the researchers to conclude that the most important aspect of programming is fostering the group experience through group challenges. The type of challenge seemed to make little difference in the
consequences and values obtained as long as the group faced the challenge together. The links between “group,” “interactions,” and “warm relationships with others” on both HVMs supports past research done on outdoor adventure group experience. Witman (1995) found that “helping/assisting others,” “realizing the importance of caring about self and others,” and “getting support of other participants” were three of the four program characteristics most valued by participants.

Some differences were noted between the two organizations. For example, NOLS students frequently mentioned the consequence of “independence” being derived from the attribute “new experience.” “Independence” was not included by OB students on the HVM, but they strongly associated “new experience” with “skill development.”

Figure 1. Hierarchical value map for Outward Bound participants (n = 162).
Data also suggest that OB and NOLS participants vary slightly in the means-end chains (attributes, consequences, and values) they produce, but the attributes, consequences, and values achieved are nearly identical. This suggests that subtle variances in program structure only determine how participants go about achieving the outcomes, but the outcomes themselves are somewhat standardized for OB and NOLS programs.

Figure 2. Hierarchical value map for NOLS participants (n = 348).

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