

Essentials for the professional

Outdoor Program Administration

Principles and Practices



Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education

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Editors

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Chapter 1

The Outdoor Program Administrator

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Since the 1960s outdoor recreation programming has become increasingly more structured and professionalized. Outdoor activity participation has increased by 4.4 percent from an estimated 208 million to 217 million since 2000 (Cordell, 2008). This growth has fueled the still-emerging professional field of outdoor program administration. Whether the outdoor program administrator is serving at a university, a government municipal parks and recreation program, a nonprofit agency, or a military welfare and recreation (MWR) program, duties are multifaceted and require the ability to apply educational theories, human psychology, management practices, and outdoor skills. Outdoor program administrators work in environments that range from meeting with an advisory board at a retreat center to leading a group of participants up the summit ridge of a snow-capped peak. This book

emphasizes the discipline-specific knowledge related to the operations and management of an outdoor program. This first chapter includes a brief introduction to the profession. Key sections in the chapter include the following:

- Outdoor program administration defined
- Outdoor program administrator defined
- Management skills
- Outdoor program administrator minimum skill competencies
- Skill acquisition for the emerging professional
- Professional maintenance

Although an outdoor program administrator should have extensive experience outdoors, outdoor skills are not the emphasis of this book. The mixed nature of workplace responsibilities requires outdoor recreation professionals to demonstrate effectiveness in the following dimensions: human skills, outdoor skills, management skills, and educational skills. The contents of this book, though targeted at administrative professionals working in the field of outdoor recreation, include common principles and practices transferable to many other administrative positions in the fields of recreation, tourism, and sport management. In this chapter we first discuss the skills one needs to be an effective outdoor program administrator; this is followed by a discussion of the work experience, training, and educational experience necessary for success in the field. This chapter also covers many of the unique responsibilities and issues that distinguish outdoor program administrators from other recreation professionals.

OUTDOOR PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION DEFINED

Outdoor program administration is the creation and implementation of programs that use outdoor environments for a deliberate recreational or educational experience. Outdoor program administrators are commonly responsible for the following types of programs:

- Adventure education
- Environmental education
- Outdoor education
- Guiding
- Military morale and welfare
- Municipal parks and recreation
- Wilderness therapy
- Summer camps

Outdoor program administration is a specialized profession because it might require both effective outdoor skills for working outside the office and effective management skills for working within an administration. Although the previous list of possible programs is not exhaustive, all of these programs have a common thread: Outdoor experiences are used deliberately for a variety of outcomes, including discipline-specific skill development, personal growth, environmental awareness, therapeutic outcomes, and instructional strategies.

For our purposes in this book, *administration* is defined as the identification of an organization's objectives and the effective acquisition, allocation, and maintenance of

resources to meet the objectives. Resources used in pursuit of an organization's objectives include human labor and talent, financial assets, physical property, equipment, intellectual property, and public image. Among the most significant resources are the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the organization's outdoor program administrator.

OUTDOOR PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR DEFINED

As we have stated, the diversity of program types within the field of outdoor programming is extensive. Depending on the organization, administrative positions include full-time, part-time, and seasonal work. Although titles and job descriptions vary across organizations, the scope of responsibilities among outdoor program administrators remains fairly consistent. An outdoor program administrator is responsible for establishing desired outcomes that support an organization's mission and then managing and maintaining resources to meet these desired outcomes. Based on the size and needs of an organization, this might require working both in the office as an administrator and in the field as an instructor.

To distinguish the physical locations in which an outdoor program administrator's duties take place, we'll use the terms "administrative" and "field." *Administrative* time is spent in an office environment focused on administrative and management duties necessary to maintain operations. *Field* time is spent working outdoors in a capacity directly related to providing a recreational experience to staff or participants. Field-time duties and responsibilities might include assessing staff competency, instructing adventure-based activities, and managing the

logistics of a field program. Many positions require outdoor program administrators to spend an immense amount of time in the field. Depending on an organization's needs, field time may be either in addition to or in lieu of administrative time.

An effective outdoor program administrator requires foundational outdoor skills developed through formal education coupled with additional training, personal and vocational practice, ongoing personal reflection, and access to professional assessment and feedback. Because of the onsite or offsite nature of the job, the outdoor program administrator must be able to work effectively both in the office and in the field.

SKILL SETS FOR OUTDOOR PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

The road to becoming an effective outdoor program administrator is challenging. With responsibilities ranging from paddling a class III river in a dry top to donning a tie for a meeting with upper management, the position of outdoor program administrator is arguably one of the most complex positions in the recreation industry. Paul Nicolazzo's seminal work *Effective Outdoor Program Design and Management* (2007) states that "program administrators must have a strong field based background, and should develop human, educational, and outdoor skills concurrently to be a quality field leader." Thus, prior to becoming an administrator, appropriate field experience—as a participant, as a leader, and as a personal adventurer—is a requisite. An outdoor program administrator should be competent in all three areas before advancing to an administrative role.

The three skill sets identified by Nicolazzo (2007) represent the essential skills of an outdoor field professional. However, to account for the transition from field-based work to administrative work, we have added a fourth skill set—management skills. This book focuses on the management skills necessary for effective outdoor program administration.

Isolating skills into a category can be challenging; many times there is significant overlap. Figure 1.1 indicates the interdependent relations among the four skill sets that make up outdoor program administration.

Complex abilities such as leadership, decision making, and judgment are represented by effective integration and application of each skill set. The more the skill sets overlap, and are applied in coordinated unison, the better an administrator will perform.

Outdoor Skills

Outdoor skills comprise the unique job qualifications required for positions in the outdoor recreation industry. The discipline-specific competencies needed to effectively guide, lead, and train others are becoming increasingly complex because of the endless variety of adventure-based activities offered to customers. For example, an outdoor program administrator might offer trips that demand instructor skill in rock climbing, mountaineering, skiing, caving, bicycle touring, canoeing, whitewater rafting, and sea kayaking.

Although administrators need not be competent in all activities, they must be able to make accurate program assessments for each outdoor activity their organization offers. Ultimately, these assessments will form the basis for risk-management strategies, training plans, and

program offerings.

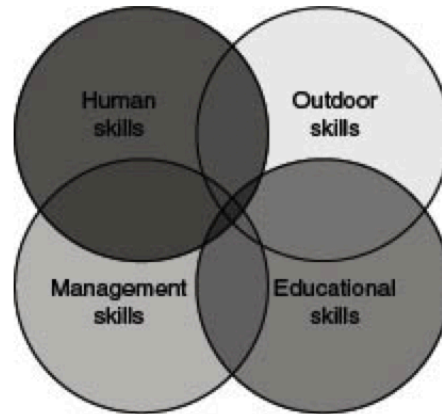


Figure 1.1 Outdoor program administration requires professionals to integrate four areas of skill competency. The intersection of the skill areas indicates effective leadership, experience-based judgment, critical and creative thinking, and decision making.

Nearly all of the aforementioned discipline-specific skills have a common set of basic outdoor skills that are needed to facilitate successful outcomes. Thus, at a minimum, competency in basic outdoor living skills is essential to being an effective outdoor administrator. However, identifying a concise and complete list of essential outdoor skills has been a subject of debate among outdoor professionals, with no uniform agreement. See [figure 1.2](#) for the authors' listing of minimum outdoor skills required to be an effective outdoor program administrator.

Human Skills

Human skills are complex and not limited to outdoor programming. Rather, effective human skills are required for employment in any industry. These skills are the essential intrapersonal awareness and interpersonal

relationships skills necessary to engage and lead others. Engaging supervisors, staff, and participants requires an ability to recognize how others are interpreting situational factors and then to react appropriately. [Figure 1.2](#) includes a list of the minimum human skills needed to be an effective outdoor program administrator.

Additionally, human skills include the development of ethics, or morals. Developed through life experiences, ethics drive individual behavior and decision making. Effective human skills allow administrators to construct a workplace environment that honors individual differences by creating a culture supportive of civil dialogue.

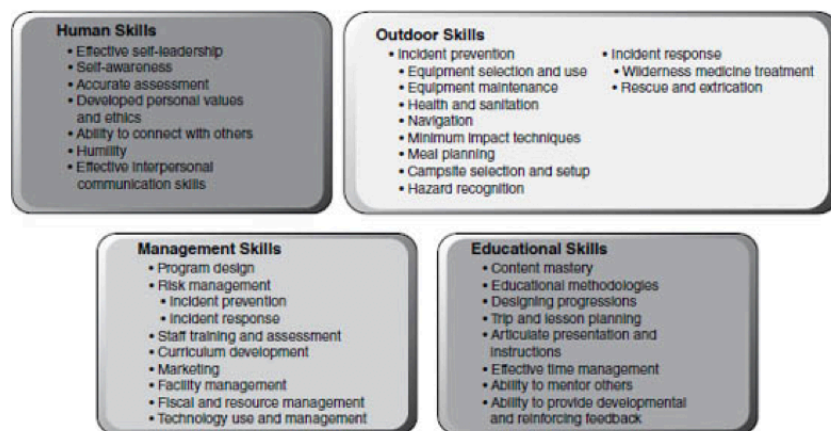


Figure 1.2 Minimum skill competencies—human, outdoor, management, and educational.

Educational Skills

Similar to human skills, the educational skill set is not limited to outdoor recreation. Educational skills are essential for effectiveness in any workplace setting. Outdoor program administrators need educational skills so they can effectively adapt teaching styles and selection of course content to meet the competency levels exhibited

by participants. Educational skills include the ability to demonstrate detailed content knowledge of the topic, design appropriate lessons, verbally articulate information, design a logical progression, and either formally or informally mentor others.



Bruce Saxman

Outdoor program administrators must possess educational skills so they can select appropriate course content to meet the competency levels of their participants.

Many times, educational skills represent the difference between success and failure on a trip or program. Whether the administrator is teaching a participant, a subordinate, or a superior, the ability to effectively deliver information to others is essential. Educational skills require content mastery, which can represent a significant challenge if an administrator is operating outside of his or her area of competency. Administrators should have content mastery in basic outdoor skills as well as in other technical skills such as climbing, kayaking, caving, or mountain biking. This is why past and present field time is important to the

effective development and maintenance of outdoor skills. Figure 1.2 includes a list of the minimum educational skills needed to be an effective outdoor program administrator.

Management Skills

Management skills include the business functions and duties that comprise the inner workings of outdoor administration. The nuts and bolts of outdoor program administration are not glamorous, but these skills are necessary for programs to be successful, financially viable, and incident free.

Common outdoor program business models require administrators to oversee a variety of onsite and offsite businesses, such as outdoor equipment rental centers, challenge courses, indoor climbing walls, retreat centers, trip and education programs, summer camps, and leadership development programs. Management skills are often grouped by their seemingly similar duties, but in practice they regularly require distinctly different approaches and applications (see figure 1.3).

Business acumen is key in this skill set. Administrators are responsible for managing an organization's resources and achieving goals and directives. Fiscal management must be an area of strength for an outdoor program administrator because the combined budgets of outdoor programs can easily range from under \$20,000 a year to well over \$2,000,000 a year. The varied facilities and equipment managed by the outdoor program administrator requires an understanding of facility design and maintenance, technical outdoor equipment, and vehicles. Administrators need competence in human resource practices to effectively hire and train staff. They must also be able to accurately assess their employees'

skills because there is always a chance an employee will need to make critical decisions about the health and safety of participants. Competency in program design, developing policy and procedure manuals, and marketing are all skills that administrators should possess because they need to be able to develop programs that participants want and that their staff is competent to lead.

Figure 1.3 Management Skills

- **Program design:** The process of moving from concepts, anchored by the organization's macrostructure (vision, mission, values, and objectives), to deliverable products or services.
- **Risk management:** The design and implementation of plans, procedures, guidelines, and policies to eliminate, minimize, and manage exposure to loss while pursuing program outcomes.
 - **Incident prevention:** The practice of obtaining desired outcomes while avoiding the loss of resources (fiscal, physical, human, perceived). Incident prevention is the core priority of the outdoor recreation administrator.
 - **Incident response:** The prescribed and purposeful actions employed by the outdoor recreation administrator to manage an incident regardless of severity or where it occurs (office or field).
- **Fiscal and resource management:** The practice of maximizing effective use of resources while maintaining the financial records and procedures of the organization.
- **Staff training and assessment:** The process through which human, educational, outdoor, and (at times) management skills are imparted upon and measured to ensure that staff effectiveness and overall program quality meet desired outcomes.

- **Curriculum and program development:** The creation and implementation of course content and learning progressions that are combined to minimize risk and meet the desired outcomes of a program.
 - **Facility management:** The process of managing a complete array of outdoor program resources, such as offices, rental programs, climbing walls, challenge courses, camps, water fronts, pools, vehicles, and trailers.
 - **Marketing:** The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.
 - **Technology use and management:** The process of applying specialized technical tools and equipment to improve services, provide new programs, and minimize risk of loss.
-

ADMINISTRATIVE COMPETENCE

All administrators should possess basic administrative strengths, but outdoor program administrators must have a base level of competency in management skills to be able to effectively operate an outdoor program. Nicolazzo (2007) and Raiola (1990) have offered similar models to describe the development of skill competency. An understanding of levels of competence is important because an outdoor program administrator must be able to accurately self-assess personal competence and the competence of the staff working for the program. Figure 1.4 shows levels of competencies demonstrated by administrators.

The outdoor program administrator serves as program's

caretaker. Intentionality is necessary when making decisions on behalf of the organization. These decisions must be deliberate and in alignment with the mission statement and desired outcomes of the organization. Unconscious behavior, whether competent or incompetent, makes an administrator's job more difficult and less rewarding and can endanger the lives of staff and participants. Although this book does not emphasize how to develop human, outdoor, and educational skills, it remains the professional's responsibility to acquire an appropriate amount of field time to effectively develop and maintain each skill set.

ACQUIRING SKILLS

Unlike many careers, a career in outdoor recreation often has no direct path to becoming an outdoor program administrator. Professionals develop the four skill sets we have discussed through a variety of approaches. These approaches, discussed in depth in the following sections, include formal education and training experiences, personal adventuring and experiences, and vocational experiences (see [figure 1.5](#)). The sum of these experiences contribute to the effectiveness of an administrator.

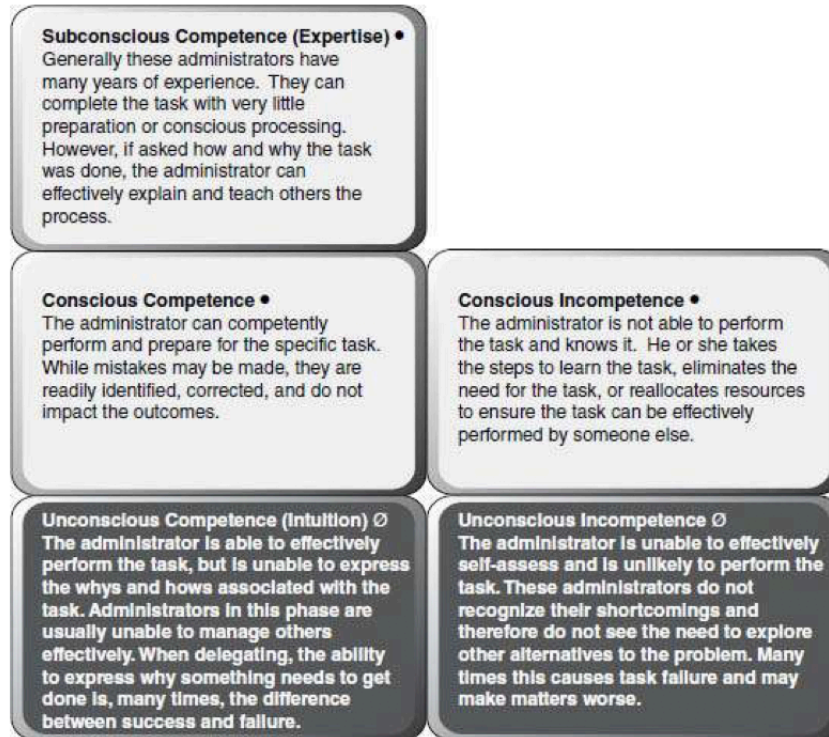


Figure 1.4 Adaptations of the competencies model to express the abilities of an administrator.



Figure 1.5 Integrated professional development plan using a combination of academic coursework, vocational training, and personal outdoor experiences to improve effectiveness.

Academic Coursework and Competency-Based Trainings

Many professionals have both undergraduate and graduate degrees in subjects such as wilderness leadership, outdoor education, outdoor recreation administration, recreation and sport management, and natural resource recreation management. These programs of study provide professionals with a strong foundation of theory, knowledge, and practice.

Additionally, competency-based trainings from organizations such as the American Canoe Association, American Mountain Guides Association, Center for Outdoor Ethics, and Wilderness Education Association offer certificates indicating that a course in a specific skill area or outdoor discipline has been completed. Within any professional discipline, a wide variance in the areas of content knowledge, application, and emphasis may exist between providers of professional trainings. This being the case, it is critically important that outdoor program administrators research program providers and course curriculums to ensure offered programs provide the desired results.

Competency in the four skill areas can also be derived from experiences within other academic disciplines. Degree programs in philosophy, psychology, education, communication, and business administration provide the program administrator opportunities to further develop and maintain the skills required for outdoor program

administration.

Personal Experience and Adventuring

Educational opportunities should be complemented by extensive outdoor field experience derived from personal experience and adventuring. Field experience has three associated components: the time spent in the backcountry, the difficulty of the activity, and the leadership role. Commonly, outdoor programs offer instruction in discipline-specific outdoor activities such as rock climbing, ice climbing, mountaineering, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, backpacking, telemark skiing, cross-country skiing, surfing, and sailing. A serious commitment to personal training and adventuring is essential because many outdoor program administrators are expected to maintain technical and educational competency in at least three discipline-specific outdoor skill areas. All individuals pursuing a career in recreation should begin developing and maintaining their outdoor skills as early as possible. Learning a new skill by taking part in a whitewater kayaking class will not make one competent without the additional commitment to run a variety of rivers with different types of rapids at varying levels of difficulty. The need to maintain skill proficiency can become a pressing issue for an administrator who accepts a position that places him or her in the office more than in the field.

Vocational Experience

The final piece of an integrated professional development plan comes from seeking vocational opportunities that place individuals in positions of increasing responsibility.

The field of recreation offers many employment possibilities that range from part-time seasonal work to full-time administrative positions. Part-time or seasonal work opportunities to consider may include employment at park and recreation programs, YMCAs, summer camps, climbing gyms, cruise ships, ski resorts, whitewater raft companies, bike touring companies, mountaineering guide services, and sea kayak guide services. Skills are best fostered through a combination of field experiences and administrative tasks such as planning, logistics, and customer service. Individuals may consider enriching employment experiences by volunteering for nonprofit programs focused on exposing youth to the outdoors. Programs like the Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, Special Olympics, and Big City Mountaineers all offer volunteers a chance to work with youth in a variety of contexts.



Geoff Harrison

Gaining field experience will prepare you for a career in outdoor program administration.

When building a base of vocational experience, keep in mind that future potential employers will consider both the diversity and duration of an applicant's experience. An applicant who has a shallow but broad base of experience derived from seven distinctly different seasonal positions might not be as qualified as someone who has had only two positions but amassed significant experience within a narrow scope of duties. Conversely, individuals who have had fewer positions may not have the adaptability required to work for a company that will ask employees to work regularly in multiple areas of their program.

Individuals pursuing a career in outdoor program administration should create a professional development plan to guide them in the pursuit of personal and vocational opportunities to complement their formal education. They should allocate ample time for skill acquisition, practice, and refinement in all four skill areas. Those pursuing a career in outdoor programming should begin their personal adventuring and vocational training as early as possible.

PROFESSIONAL MAINTENANCE

Competency creep is the slow degeneration of skill competency caused by lack of review, lack of practice, and lack of application. The best way to prevent competency creep is to commit time to maintaining each skill at or above the level required for a particular position.

Arguably, early in a professional career, skill

development falls on the shoulders of the applicant. Skill development is not necessarily the responsibility of the employer because applicants obtain positions as part of a competitive process. Top candidates will have committed to the necessary skill development and will arrive possessing the required skills. However, once hired, skill maintenance becomes a shared responsibility between the employee and employer.

Outdoor program administration requires professionals to maintain an expansive and complex set of skills in a variety of disciplines. When working in the field or in the office, outdoor program administrators are responsible for positively representing their organization at all times. Positive representation includes dressing in professional attire both in the office and in the field, clearly articulating the vision and mission of their program to superiors and the public at large, and modeling expected behaviors at all times to staff and professional peers. It is the responsibility of each administrator to educate others about the complexities of the profession and to serve as an ambassador for the entire industry. There are tools available to administrators to help prevent competency creep. Regular involvement in professional affiliations and conferences, competency and certification courses, scouting trips and field-based staff trainings all help an administrator maintain and enhance human, educational, outdoor, and management skills.

Professional Affiliations and Conferences

Many professional organizations serve the needs of outdoor program administrators. Although a professional

might be an active member of an organization, such as the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE), it is wise for him or her also to join other relevant organizations, or at least to periodically attend their meetings. Many organizations offer annual conferences and training institutes that bring professionals from around the country together to share information, learn new material, and network. A few of the relevant organizations are listed in table 1.1.

Competency and Certification Courses

Continuing education through participation in competency-based trainings or recertification courses is an excellent means to maintain professional skills. Competency-based trainings offered by private companies and nonprofits should be considered as a method for skill review and enhancement. Organizations such as the American Alpine Institute, Colorado Mountain School, Outward Bound, and the National Outdoor Leadership School offer courses emphasizing skill acquisition and application. To stay engaged and passionate about their profession, administrators should consider taking discipline-specific courses in areas in which they feel their skills are lacking or need improvement.

Certification courses are another avenue for skill and knowledge development. Areas of development may include outdoor skill topics such as wilderness medicine, river rescue, or avalanche safety, or they can focus on areas of human development, such as conflict resolution and mediation. Certification courses can be expensive and should be researched to ensure they provide the expected

quality, content, and consistency.

Table 1.1 Options for Ongoing Professional Development

Recreation associations
Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE)
Association for Experiential Education (AEE)
National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA)
National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA)
Wilderness Education Association (WEA)
Technical training associations
American Canoe Association (ACA)
Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT)
American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA)
Professional Climbing Instructors Association (PCIA)
Higher education associations
Association of College Unions International (ACUI)
Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA)
American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD)

» **Wilderness emergency medical training.** A minimum professional training requirement for most outdoor program administrators is completion of a Wilderness First Responder course. A host of quality organizations provide this training, including the Wilderness Medicine Training Center, Wilderness Medical Associates, SOLO, Aerie Back-country Medicine, Desert Mountain Medicine, and the Wilderness Medicine Institute. The organizations listed here are private providers of wilderness medicine, and each offers a unique curriculum and approach for content delivery. Fortunately, the listed companies offer reciprocity toward each other—that is, they recognize each other’s training as valid, and recertification is offered to graduates. Because each provider offers different training and has different strengths and education methodologies, individuals should consider diversifying their learning experiences by taking courses from several of the providers just listed.

» **Discipline-specific skill certifications.** Certification courses offered through nonprofit entities are

another viable avenue for continuing education. Courses and certifications are an excellent means to gain new knowledge and refresh existing knowledge. However, infrequent professional training is not enough to retain competence because ongoing practice is necessary for achieving and maintaining skills. Courses and certifications in technical outdoor disciplines are offered by the following associations:

- American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA)
- American Canoe Association (ACA)
- Professional Climbing Instructors Associations (PCIA)
- Wilderness Education Association (WEA)
- American Canyoneering Association (ACA)

» **Center for Outdoor Ethics.** The Leave No Trace curriculum is managed by the Center for Outdoor Ethics. Minimum-impact outdoor adventuring is essential to sustaining the industry. All prospective outdoor professionals should consider becoming instructors qualified to teach the Leave No Trace Trainer and Master Educator curriculums. These courses are not certifications but rather completion courses sanctioned by the Center for Outdoor Ethics. Courses teach principles and practices for environmental stewardship.

Scouting Trips and Field-Based Staff Trainings

Unlike building-based recreation programming, outdoor program administrators need to routinely scout activity sites prior to developing new programs. Content knowledge can come from third-party sources such as personal interactions, books, and the Internet, but the best

knowledge always comes from firsthand experiences. Because of the risks associated with outdoor recreation, administrators should not send instructors and participants to unknown activity sites. Scouting trips are an effective means for an administrator to gain knowledge and familiarity with a course area, identify site hazards, and develop risk-management practices for each site. Scouting trips are also effective in helping a professional maintain field-based skill competence.

Staff training is another means for helping administrators to maintain skills. Field-based staff trainings need to occur on a regular basis so that administrators can make accurate assessments when considering who should staff their programs. Scouting trips, staff trainings, and leadership opportunities with other organizations are recommended ways to assist in maintaining skill competency.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

As stated earlier, preventing competency creep is a consistent challenge for outdoor program administrators. The profession is different from other forms of recreation in that a professional may be required to spend an immense amount of time away from the office. To maintain educational and outdoor skill competency, the administrator should periodically work in the field as an outdoor leader. However, time spent in maintaining professional competency should be purposeful and efficient. Obviously, time in the field takes away from time in the office, and the expected office-based administrative duties must be completed.

Additionally, that time is taken away from personal functions such as spending weekends with family, attending kids' soccer games, mowing the lawn, playing golf, and so on. But the need to remain competent is essential to running quality, safe, and engaging programs, and maintaining competency takes time. Like individuals in other time-demanding careers, outdoor program administrators must find and maintain a healthy balance between the demands and rewards of professional and personal pursuits. To create sustainability within the profession, outdoor program administrators must have effective and open discussions with supervisors about how best to manage the demands of the position. For additional information, see [chapter 13](#).

SUMMARY

Outdoor program administration is a demanding but rewarding profession. The profession offers opportunities to work in challenging business environments similar to those found within any other corporate industry, but with the joys and opportunities provided by the outdoors. Outdoor program administrators are required to work in a variety of professional capacities and are regularly responsible for multiple business operations and functions, including

- program design,
 - instruction,
 - risk management,
 - staff training and assessment,
 - curriculum development,
 - marketing,
-

- facility management,
- fiscal and resource management, and
- technology use and management.

The diversity of skills and experiences required to serve as an effective outdoor program administrator are vast and can be achieved only through a synthesis of personal experiences, formal education, professional trainings, and vocational opportunities. The responsibilities of outdoor program administrators are multifaceted and require a deep working knowledge of and ability to appropriately use educational theories, human psychology, administrative practices, risk management, and technical outdoor skills. We have introduced the four skill areas—human, outdoor, management, and educational—in this first chapter as a means of caching the required broad base of knowledge and abilities required of outdoor program administrators into four common-language categories.

Long and rewarding careers are available to those who aspire to be outdoor program administrators. The ceiling in the profession seems limitless; domestic and international employment opportunities exist within private businesses, universities, government parks and recreation programs, nonprofit agencies, and military welfare and recreation (MWR) programs.