WAFFYS - Wilderness Adventures for First Year Students
"...physically challenging natural environment based orientation programs emphasizing small group work help first year students adjust to college"

**Program Description**

Began in 2001, WAFFYS backpacking expeditions empower incoming students with a positive personal and social transition into college. WAFFYS gives incoming students the opportunity to challenge themselves and grow as individuals through the process of experiential education. WAFFYS trips are structured to require participants as a group to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.

After teaching the group to competently cook, camp & navigate through the wilderness, our Instructors step back and allow the group to take ownership over their trip and experience the natural consequences of their decisions. The process of making these decisions as a group helps WAFFYS students become invested in the group’s choices, enhances their decision-making ability and develops meaningful peer relationships that transfer into participants’ first year at UNC. By having positive group interactions, students experience an increase in self-confidence and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the way they relate to others.

**Goals & Research**

The following summary of findings is from a research project conducted by Susan P. Cole using participants from the WAFFYS program. Susan was the Challenge Course Program Coordinator at UNC’s Outdoor Education Center and a Master’s candidate (December 2003) in the Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies at UNC Chapel Hill. The purpose of this study was to explore the social adjustment process for new students who have participated in a Wilderness Orientation Program. This research shows that the program was beneficial and helped the students develop into who they are now on their college path. Participants stated that their gains far exceeded the students’ initial expectations for participating in WAFFYS. After the data was analyzed, three common themes emerged: peer development, self-confidence, and decision-making skills.

**Peer development**

Throughout the trip students learned more about each other and realized that while they each had different interests, they now shared this common bonding experience. The common WAFFYS experience was powerful to the participants. These students experienced a stronger connection to each other through the social interactions during the trip, such as the van ride to the trailhead, hiking, and talking in camp.

**Self-confidence**

The students expanded their peer development and experienced increased self-confidence by successfully working with a new group of people from varied backgrounds in unfamiliar and challenging settings. An increase in self-confidence was identified by participants as the act of going out and trying something new such as backpacking, completing the physical challenge, and having that sense of accomplishment as a group at the end of the trip.

**Decision-making Skills**

The third theme that emerged from this study was the importance of decision-making skills. When the group arrived at the outdoor center they were unaware of what was ultimately ahead of them. They knew they were going backpacking and that they were going to meet new people and hopefully have some fun. The students did not realize that decision-making skills were a key element of the program. Even so, each of the students acknowledged the decision-making aspect of WAFFYS was a positive building block, because college life was full of making decisions on their own.

Based on our 2012 WAFFYS Participant Self-Assessments, 64% of these students felt there was an increase in their excitement to meet a new group of people.

Based on our 2012 WAFFYS Participant Self-Assessments, 73% of these students claimed that they noticed a boost in their confidence to deal efficiently with unexpected events.

Based on our 2012 WAFFYS Participant Self-Assessments, 73% of these students observed a positive development in their own abilities to spontaneously come up with creative solutions to problems.