

Program Assessment Report

Outdoor Studies: 2017-18

Overview

Outdoor Studies at the University of Alaska Southeast combines outdoor skills and academic coursework in order to provide a liberal arts approach to studying human recreation and interaction with the natural world.

Outdoor Studies at UAS offers three different degree programs: the Outdoor Skills and Leadership Certificate, the Outdoor and Adventure Studies Designated Emphasis in the BLA Degree, and the Outdoor Studies Emphasis area in the Geography, Environmental, and Outdoor Studies BA. All programs include outdoor risk management, leadership, specific outdoor skills, environmental philosophy and literature, and academic electives.

ODS Program Mission

The University of Alaska Southeast's Outdoor Studies Program offers outdoor skills courses within an academic liberal arts framework. Through the combination of traditional academic and experiential courses, we help students develop a deeper understanding of themselves, their relationship to the natural environment, and the outdoor activities they pursue. UAS Outdoor Studies Programs seek to develop thoughtful, well-rounded, critical thinkers with specific skills needed to lead in outdoor and adventure settings and general skills needed to be successful in in all chosen pursuits.

Core Values

The three ODS degree programs share two core values:

- **Informed Understanding of Outdoor Activities:** Students should develop an understanding of, and continually reflect upon, the history of, cultural influences on, and environmental factors relating to, outdoor recreation and activities.
- **Excellence in Outdoor Skills:** Outdoor skills and decision making in various environments should be performed at highly developed level, utilizing good judgment, with the confidence and ability to be responsible for themselves and others.

Program Enrollments

There were 29 students enrolled in ODS Program in 2017.

15 students were enrolled in the The Outdoor Skills and Leadership Certificate program. Eight were enrolled with the certificate as their primary major and 7 were enrolled with the certificate as a secondary major while working on a 4-year degree in another field. 9 students were enrolled in the ODS track of the BA in Geography,

Environmental and Outdoor Studies. 5 students were enrolled in the Outdoor and Adventure Studies BLA.

In addition to serving ODS students, nearly all ODS courses are stacked with PE courses in order to serve a wider group of students and community members. Almost all ODS Courses are at, or very close to enrollment capacity.

Assessment Methods

Exit Interviews

As outlined in our assessment plan, we conduct exit interviews with all graduating students. Students are asked to reflect on their goals coming into the program, what they felt the best part of the program was for them, and what changes they recommend for the program.

Summary of student responses:

While a few students mentioned professional goals (working in the guiding industry) the majority of students listed reasons more related to personal improvement (confidence, desire to push themselves, practical knowledge, and self-awareness) as their motivations for enrolling in the program.

All students felt that the program met or exceeded their expectations and that they acquired the skills that they wanted coming into the program.

In the students' view the best part of the program was the time spent developing in the field. Several students cited the capstone trip as the high point of the program. Two cited the social aspect of working as a group as the best part of the program. One student said that the AMS internship was the highlight of her program.

There was no consistent "worst part of the program." One student referred to the internal competitiveness of the group, one referred to the difference of abilities in the student group, another said that it was difficult to work in a group of people of different ages. One claimed that some of the adjunct instructors could be more formal in their presentation of student expectations.

Students also recommended some changes to the program: Two students recommended that the program be more selective on the basis of physical ability. Two students recommended that we work harder to communicate expectations at the beginning of the program.

Summary of Instructor Evaluations from Capstone Course:

Students in the Certificate Capstone are assessed on professional behavior (preparedness, leadership, confidence and composure in field environments), hard skills (technical proficiency in a variety of discipline specific activities), soft skills (critical thinking, decision making, communication, and judgment), and informed understanding of outdoor activities (ability to apply academic concepts to capstone activities). In each category, students are rated on a 1-5 scale (5 indicating excellence, 3 meets expectations, and 1 unacceptable).

Average Ratings of Graduating Students:

Professional Behavior: 3.9

Hard Skills: 3.3

Soft Skills: 4.1

Informed Understanding of Outdoor Activities: 4.3

Although in each category the students ultimately met expectations, the scores for 2017-18 are lower than in all past years. It is unclear whether this has to do with the makeup of the cohort or with courses and instruction within the program. Instructors determined to respond to student suggestions to better clarify expectations. We also determined that we should attempt to work harder to give regular feedback to students and to work to promote a learning environment in which students support each other. We will revisit this question during our annual assessment meeting after the spring capstone.

Faculty Meetings

In 2017 the ODS Advisory Committee was established and began meeting. It was determined that the committee would meet once a term and address program issues including instruction, curriculum, risk management, and any other relevant issues. As well, program faculty reviewed the assessment report for the prior year and implemented curriculum changes based on recommendations, including an innovative scheduling approach to Outdoor Leadership and Mountain Adventure that put students in the field every Wednesday, followed by classroom meeting in the evening. Ultimately, we decided, based on feedback from students and other instructors that we need to revisit that option and will make changes before the coming term. Finally, we reiterated our commitment to improving our training for teaching assistants and new adjunct instructors.

Overall, we are happy with the continuing improvement to all aspects of the program. We are especially encouraged by student feedback concerning the value of the program in their lives.