

The Building of Outdoor Recreation and Leadership at Sweet Briar College

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It is not necessarily assumed that women belong in the outdoors. Even in the modern world, there are still cultural barriers. Yet, while in many cases it is still considered to be a male dominant area, outdoor recreation is growing in popularity among females of all generations. Tasha Gillum, past director of the Outdoor Program at Sweet Briar College, recalls what it was like growing up as a child, “If I came home with grass stains as a kid, I would get questioned, but not my brothers.” In the past, a woman’s place was in the home. As children, females grew up taking care of the home, and only a select few joined males on outdoor adventures, such as fishing, camping, or hunting. Women would rarely discover these skills on their own, most of the time they were introduced to outdoor activities by their male family members, or later on by their husbands (Link, vii). Now, through activities, groups, and programming structured to females, women are finding their place and discovering that they can be leaders in the outdoors. At Sweet Briar College, a women’s college in Virginia, an Outdoor Program was formed to provide students with wilderness and leadership programming. Through the single-sex Outdoor Program, students discover that they can be wilderness leaders in a stereotypically male space.

While outdoor activities have been around for centuries, programs designed to enhance personal and physical development by involvement in the outdoors did not happen until 1941. The history of wilderness programming began in Aberdovey, Wales by a man named Kurt Hahn (Miner and Boldt, 1981). Kurt Hahn, seeing a need to equip young men with “a reliance on their own resources, and selfless bound with their fellows” (p. 35), founded a wilderness programming school called Outward Bound. By participating in Outward Bound programs- such as orienteering, search and rescue, athletics, small boat sailing, ocean and mountain expeditions, obstacle courses, and service to the local communities (Priest and Gass, p. 29)- young men had an outlet to explore the wilderness.

After World War II, the purpose of Outward Bound changed. Seeing that the social skills of initiative, enterprise, memory, imagination, skill and care, self-discipline, and compassion were declining (Priest and Gass, p. 29), Outward Bound began to structure its programs to provide opportunities for the young men to develop and enhance these skills. The intent of Outward Bound became to provide young men with “a reliance of their own resources, and a selfless bond with their fellows” (Miner and Boldt, pg. 35). Gaining wildly in popularity, Outward Bound soon spread out internationally, including to the United States in 1962 (Miner and Boldt, 1981). It wasn't until 1965 and 1966 that Outward Bound began offering programs to female participants. With this new addition to its program, Outward Bound “initiated a trend in providing women access to institutionalized outdoor adventure (Warren, 1996, p. 10). By opening its door to women, Outward Bound validated a woman's place in the outdoors. Many other outdoor programs were developed and followed Outward Bound's example, such as the outdoor program at Sweet Briar College.

At Sweet Briar College, women are provided with an environment that encourages them to be active in the outdoors. Since 1906, when the college opened its door, Female athletics such were a part of the college's experience. However, wilderness programming- activities structured around outdoor activities such as hiking, canoeing, camping, etc- did not happen until 1980 (Stamen). Founded to provide students with wilderness experience and a stress relief outlet, the Outdoor Program (called SWEBOP at the time) was designed to collaborate with the Physical Education department on programs (Sweet Briar College, Office of the President Letter). The program started off with one weekend trip and one day trip a month, and a strong focus was on gaining publicity and interest in the Sweet Briar community (Sweet Briar College, Office of the President Letter). The description of the Outdoor Program coordinator was to provide

opportunities for outdoor activities at a small women's college that ranged "from backpacking on the Appalachian Trail to white-water canoeing and rafting, kayaking, spelunking in nearby caves, rock climbing, and hiking" (Sweet Briar College Catalog). The response of the students was encouraging, and women flocked to the events sponsored by SWEBOP.

This framework for the Outdoor Program continued until 1996, when the part-time director noticed a need for a change. Laura Stamen started working at the Sweet Briar Outdoor Program in the summer of 1994 (Stamen). At the time, she continued to organize one or two trips a month, and her title was program coordinator and resident coordinator (Stamen). Under Stamen's guidance, the trip count increased. Soon, the Outdoor Program started to do one trip a weekend (Stamen). But still Stamen wanted more from SWEBOP. In 1996, Stamen wrote a proposal requesting changes to be made to the Outdoor Program. To make a larger impact on the community, and to focus more of her time on SWEBOP, Stamen asked to be a full time director (Stamen). She was granted that title. To provide more opportunities for students to have an outlet in the outdoors, Stamen asked to expand on longer trips and activities, including spring break trips and a J-term program (Stamen). She was granted that, but the J-term was denied.

The biggest change happened, however, when Stamen requested permission to build a leadership program. At the time, Sweet Briar did not have any leadership programs (Stamen). Stamen wanted to empower "young women to do things they never thought they could do. To lead." Stamen said that she, "was determined to stay and say 'Let's do it, ladies!'" This attitude encouraged the Sweet Briar staff, who was at first uncertain about the leadership program, to agree to this change. Stamen says that everyone was very supportive, especially the dean of academics. "She liked how we could create this gem in a rural Virginia. It was a good marketing goal and activities for student life. And the leadership knowledge was extremely beneficial."

Next, however, Stamen had to incite the same enthusiasm and willingness to be leaders in the outdoors in the students.

Outdoor programs typically have a male stigma, so it can be a challenge for women to accept their own comfortability in leadership. Zepatos describes this situation by providing a real-life example that took place in a coed rock climbing program. In the situation, the girls in the group were “afraid that they would be made fun of if they failed in front of the guys” (Zepatos 55). After separating the girls from the boys, however, the girls climbed much better and were “more supportive and encouraging of each other than the guys were” (Zepatos 55). This is just one of many examples where coed trips proved to be weakening to the female perception that they can participate in the wilderness as well as males.

Stereotypes between men and women also occur more often in coed situations. For example, research has shown that women have proportionally less strength than men do, but when women do less or carry less than men, a woman’s contribution in the group is questioned. When females carry less in their backpacks, the message that is sent is “that the woman is not carrying her own weight” (Warren 12). The discrepancy in competence persists because “most outdoor pursuits have an image of appropriateness to them... when females are asked to copy what appears to be male models of operation, this coercion can create resistance and may lead to feelings of irrelevance” (Nolan, 1993, pg. 15). Unfortunately, most wilderness programming was not designed for females.

Historically, women are taught to think that the outdoors is no place for them. The typical image the media painted the picture of the outdoors as a “scary, uncomfortable, and intimidating event” (Warren 12). Through social conditioning, the concept of women belonging in the outdoors was a question about femininity, and Stamen wanted female college students to not

only participate in activities, but to become leaders in the outdoors. Females learn leadership and perform leadership differently than males (Van Nostrand 1993), and since the design of most leadership programs were geared towards the male population, the design of the leadership program at Sweet Briar needed to be designed for female leaders.

Stamen worked hard on the leadership portion of the Outdoor Program. She put out posters, and incited in students the curiosity to learn (Stamen). The benefits offered in the leadership program was “building leadership skills, experience in the outdoors, new friendships, and being able to put “outdoor instructor” on a resume” (SWEBOP Instructors). In the beginning, the goal to have students lead beginner trips was uncertain due to legal and liability issues (SWEBOP Instructors). Through intense instructor training, however, Stamen was able to reach that goal. In the 1999-2000 college catalogue, the Outdoor Program instructor option was first put into print. The catalogue stated that “the instructor program provides leadership and outdoor adventure training to students who want to become instructors for beginner-level trips. Instructors learn group dynamics, communication and leadership skills, as well as the technical skills for each adventure program.” Before Stamen knew it, students were asking how they could get involved in the leadership program. There was a big interest in the program, and Stamen was encouraged by the positive response by both the faculty and staff members and the students (Stamen).

Tasha Gillum, a past Sweet Briar Outdoor Program director, commented about the differences that she has seen in a coed setting versus a single sex setting. “There are norms in society that we fall back into in a coed setting. A guy offers to help with your backpack, and you let him, where you can take care of it yourself... It is a team effort in women’s group, and we all take care of each other, but we are still self-reliant.” At Sweet Briar College, students are given

the opportunity to learn and lead without the stereotypical roles that society places them in. The students can explore different roles and skills without worrying about what is masculine or feminine. Students are able to try something new, mess up, try again, and not have to worry about the stigma of if it's okay. Gillum says that at Sweet Briar, "There is an opportunity to lead and a comradery, it is the shared experience to learn about yourself in a group where others girls are doing the same. It is a beautiful bonding experience."

In the midst of building the leadership program at Sweet Briar, Stamen had one more lasting impact on Sweet Briar. Stamen proposed an outdoor leadership course that students would take as a college credit. At first, her fellow faculty members were uncertain, "Because I did not have the credentials and a PhD. I had the experience, but they didn't like the academic side because they were afraid it would muddy their standards." In the spring of 1997, however, Stamen was able to incorporate a class called Outdoor Adventure Sports into the curriculum (Course archive). This was a one credit course that introduced team building, Outing Cabin certification, hiking, outdoor safety and technique (such as knot tying, fire building, canoeing and rock climbing skills, cooking in the outdoors, and shelter building), and trip planning (Course archive). The students also participated in day trips and overnight trips as a part of the class. Even though this class was not about leadership, but about outdoor activities, Stamen said that she, "tried to incorporate some leadership skills in there."

The following year, Stamen was allowed to teach the course she originally wanted. Open to all students, Stamen taught a course called Leadership: Theory and Philosophy (Course archive). The objective of the course was for "students to examine leadership using the wilderness as an experiential laboratory" (Course archive). The environment allowed the students to "experience leadership challenges, make decisions, and take risks," as students

learned “leadership theory and technique that would be applicable throughout their lives” (Course archive). Through this course, the physical education department was improved and expanded upon. Any student had an opportunity to learn about leadership and the wilderness in the same class. Sadly, this class is not currently offered at Sweet Briar.

It is this setting and atmosphere that has inspired students at Sweet Briar to broaden their horizons and strengthen their skills in the outdoors. Through the influence of Laura Stamen, the Sweet Briar Outdoor Program, and the courses offered at Sweet Briar, students were given an opportunity to discover their place in the wilderness. More importantly, they were able to define their leadership skills and flourish in a setting that embodied the empowerment of women.

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Additional Sources:

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Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1982-1983 and 1999-2000.

Historical Documents from the Sweet Briar Outdoor Program archives:

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