Outdoor Action 40th Anniversary: State of the Program Report



Frosh Trip 2013 - OA Leaders (207 - red), Support Teams (56 - blue), Command Center (19 - purple) Frosh Trip Coordinators & OA Staff (7 - black)

Executive Summary

During its forty-year history Outdoor Action (OA) has achieved incredible success. It has transformed the orientation process for incoming students at Princeton. In addition, OA has built a unique learning laboratory where students have the opportunity to practice real leadership in service to others. OA Leaders are some of Princeton's most successful and influential leaders across the campus. The overall Outdoor Action Program is also one of Princeton's greatest untapped resources. Expanding the program is clearly one of the best investments Princeton can make in student leadership development over the next decade.

The Program

Over the past forty years Outdoor Action has provided experiential learning and leadership development opportunities for Princeton students, staff and alumni. Over sixty percent of all current Princeton undergraduates have participated in some form of Outdoor Action activity.

Frosh Trip

The OA Frosh Trip is the largest single outdoor orientation program in the U.S. Each fall, more than fifty-five percent of the incoming freshmen class begin their Princeton experience with a six-day outdoor trip where they learn about Princeton from experienced upperclass students. The success of Frosh Trip over the last forty years in orienting new students to Princeton, capitalizing on diversity and teaching leadership and self-reliance is a key impetus for the University's plan to require all incoming students to have a small-group orientation experience.

Diversity

By virtue of its sheer size the Frosh Trip brings together the largest number of freshmen in one experience and allows for interactions and friendships to develop across the boundaries that often separate students on campus, enhancing the University's diversity goals.

Leader Training Program

Outdoor Action is the single largest and most influential student leadership development program on campus. Students who complete the program are role models and mentors both for freshmen and for other students across the campus. The broad-reaching impact of the Leader Training program is evident in the myriad ways that OA Leaders enhance campus life through their involvement and leadership as Residential College Advisors, on sports teams, student government, student organizations and community service.

Goals for the Future

Outdoor Action is a year-round operation. We have identified three key areas for future growth of the program:

Student Leadership Development Training
 Student leaders are the cornerstone of the program and our goal is to provide the very best leadership development program for every student who wishes to participate. OA provides a

unique experiential learning model where students gain practical leadership skills through real world experiences of being responsible for others.

• Trip Activities during the Academic Year

There is significant student interest in expanding OA programs throughout the year. Thanks to a one-time \$10,000 grant OA has begun offering outdoor and adventure-based trips and activities to students during the academic year with great success. Expanding these trip activities during the year will extend OA's positive impact to even more students and provide opportunities for greater leadership development for OA Leaders.

• Expanding our Reach

OA has developed innovative leadership programs to serve the larger campus through training provided to Bridge Year students, Residential College Advisors, Pace Center leaders, varsity sports teams and University departments. There are considerable opportunities for OA to utilize its expertise in offering leadership development programming to the larger campus.

Budget

Since its inception in 1973 Outdoor Action has been funded almost entirely from student fees. Over the past four decades OA participation has grown by over 800 percent and the operating costs have increased by approximately 400 percent. Ninety percent of OA's annual revenue is generated from student fees and alumni donations. In order for the Outdoor Action Program to continue its excellence in outdoor and leadership development and move to a model where students no longer need to pay to become leaders, a long-term plan should be developed to fully fund or endow the program.

Opportunities

The following recommendations present the opportunities for Outdoor Action to fully achieve its mission and to support the University's goals for orientation and student leadership development over the next five to ten years

- As part of the University's initiative to offer an orientation program for all incoming students the Frosh Trip Program could be expanded to accommodate significantly more freshmen. This would involve developing new program activities and locations to accommodate the most diverse participant population and will require training and supervising additional leaders.
- Well-trained student leaders are the core of the program so OA must provide the best professional training and ongoing supervision for student leaders.
- The OA Leader Training Program should be fully funded so that it is free to all students who chose to participate. This will increase the number of leaders as well as expand the diversity of the leader pool. An increased leader pool will be essential to operate an expanded Frosh Trip.
- OA must both continue and expand our efforts to reach out to broader and more diverse segments of the campus community. One of OA's top goals must be to reflect the same rich diversity (racial, ethnic, socio-economic, sexual orientation, etc.) as the current student body. This means educating all students about the program so that becoming an OA Leader is seen as a positive opportunity for students from all backgrounds.
- Outdoor Action should offer a robust set of trip activities during the year to enhance student leadership development, encourage diverse interaction across the entire campus community,

- and provide healthy options for leadership development, education and recreation. Academic year trips also create new entry points into the program to expand the diversity of the leader pool and will help build the experienced leaders needed to become Leader Trainers and Instructors to train new leaders.
- Outdoor Action should expand its collaborative educational programming, training and
 consulting services to administrative and academic departments and such as University Health
 Services, the Residential Colleges, Athletics, the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students,
 and student organizations. Such joint ventures enhance the success of both Outdoor Action and
 its partners.

State of the Program Report

History

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the Outdoor Action Program. Over the past four decades Outdoor Action (OA) has made an indelible mark on the campus as both the largest pre-orientation experience for incoming freshmen and as the University's premiere leadership development program for undergraduates. This State of the Program Report reflects on the history of the program and its impact, the current operation and offers a look at the potential future of the program over the next five to ten years.

The Program

Over the past forty years Outdoor Action has become a broad-based program that provides experiential learning and leadership development opportunities for Princeton students, staff and alumni. Over sixty percent of all current Princeton undergraduates have participated in one or more Outdoor Action activities.

The very first Frosh Trip in September 1974 accepted 100 students and 15 student leaders. The 2012 Frosh Trip, the largest in the program's history and the largest single outdoor orientation program in North America, accepted 825 freshmen and 247 student leaders. Since 1974 over 30,000 students have participated in some form of Outdoor Action activity: Frosh Trip, Leader Training or trip activities during the academic year.

The original proposal for Outdoor Action, written in 1973, clearly articulates the goals of the program and how OA has supported the mission of the University for the past forty years.

"This proposal is prompted by a continuing need for new and innovative ways to facilitate interaction and increase communication among diverse members of the University community. The context of an Outdoor Action program encourages a person to open up and share with others in a setting which is supportive of failure as well as success. Such a setting may be found in a classroom, on the athletic field, or perhaps in a dormitory room. But the kind of total involvement required of participants in a challenging outdoor adventure, which demands group cooperation and individual determination, is difficult to replicate in the academic setting of the campus.

These core values of Outdoor Action continue to be implemented throughout the program today as reflected in the program's mission statement.

OA Mission Statement

To provide educational and character development experiences which advance personal responsibility, health and well-being, community, leadership development, civic engagement, and stewardship for Princeton and the natural world through adventure-based experiential education.

Impact of the Outdoor Action Program

The impact of Outdoor Action over the past forty years is both broad and deep. It can be seen not only through the relationships built on the trail through working together but also in the leadership skills that OA Leaders inject into all of their academics and campus activities. The list of OA Leaders who have won major prizes and fellowships is just one benchmark of the impact OA has on campus. Ask any student who has participated, an alumnus who was a leader, or parent whose child went on Frosh Trip and you will hear just how important Outdoor Action is to the Princeton experience.

These are a few of the goals that Outdoor Action achieves through its varied programming:

- The Frosh Trip provides an opportunity for interaction across the diversity of the University community, breaking down stereotypes and the many social silos that separate students. The experience and friendships made through OA serve as bridges across diverse groups and campus populations.
- The OA Frosh Trip program has proven to be extremely effective in easing the transition of incoming students to college life.
- The OA Frosh Trip has been shown to reduce unhealthy expectations about alcohol use on campus.¹
- Outdoor Action promotes friendships and positive social interaction between classes and across the University community.
- Participation in all Outdoor Action programs results in increased understanding of the dynamics of groups and the need for effective communication, sharing, and the interdependent nature of interpersonal interaction.
- Outdoor Action provides a comprehensive leadership development program for hundreds of students each year that provides real world experience in leading and mentoring peers.
- OA activities are effective methods for reduction of stress from academic pressure and provide a healthy and non-alcohol oriented form of social interaction.

Frosh Trip

The Outdoor Action Frosh Trip is the largest single outdoor orientation program in the U.S. Each fall, more than fifty-five percent of the incoming freshmen class begin their Princeton experience with a six-day outdoor trip through activities like backpacking, biking, canoeing, farming, and rock climbing. With the help of a dedicated group of Outdoor Action leaders—Princeton upperclass students—freshmen learn not only about campus life, but also about themselves and their new classmates by learning to work together as part of a team. There is something unique about traveling on the trail with ten other people, hearing their stories, dealing with challenges and needing to work hard together as well as 'unplugging' from cell phones and the Internet for six days that creates such a cohesive, engaged and interdependent group. Frosh Trip serves as a great 'mixing bowl' of the Princeton experience. It exposes freshmen to the rich diversity of their class, allows them to connect with students in their residential college and students in other colleges and builds relationships with upperclass students. The story from this year's trip of the male varsity lacrosse player who met and became friends with a male dancer on his trip 'someone who I never would have met or chosen to interact with otherwise' illustrates how Frosh Trip encourages and amplifies University messages around diversity. The success

¹ The Effects of the Outdoor Action Frosh Trip on Freshmen's Adaptation to Princeton University: A Study of Pluralistic Ignorance, Senior Thesis in Psychology, Brian Wardwell, Princeton University, April 1999

of this unique formula over the past four decades cannot be disputed. The program has grown almost every year for forty years and ninety-nine percent of this year's participants surveyed would recommend the trip to a friend.

What attracts so many students to the Frosh Trip each year is the unique emphasis that Outdoor Action places on how to create a successful student experience at Princeton. OA Leaders, as role models and mentors, teach incoming students about values like community and diversity and provide information about campus social life and academics that help reduce the anxiety that many students have about starting college. Princeton's Frosh Trip is the most emulated of any college outdoor preorientation program. Since it began in 1974, more than 18,700 students have started their Princeton experience with Frosh Trip and learned what it means to be a member of a diverse community. Frosh Trip participants say it best:

I really loved OA and think it helped me so much. Before OA I was really nervous about fitting in and finding friends at Princeton, but OA showed me how awesome Princeton students are and how easy it is to make friends. I felt much better going into orientation week knowing that I already had a strong network of friends.

I made friends in my OA trip that I will probably have for life, we became that close. We all still hang out multiple times every week and I'm just so glad that I have this group to help me transition and be there for me when times are tough in Princeton. The conversations about Princeton social life made me feel much more at ease and excited to start my life at Princeton because I felt confident that I would find a place where I fit in.

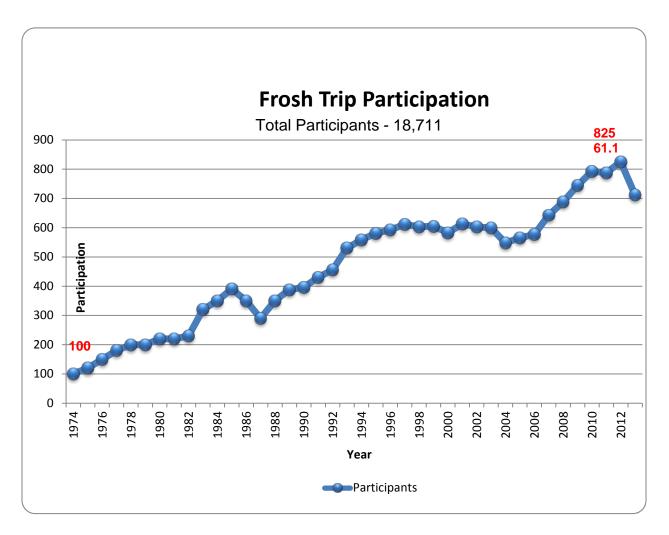
The most valuable part was definitely the teambuilding and group bonding that went on throughout the trip. It was good to first get an introduction to college life in an environment where factors such as appearance and social status mattered very little. I felt that the OA environment reduced the tendency to be judgmental and instead encouraged people to search for similarities and make friends who might otherwise have been outside of their social circle.

This trip really helped me to see that the other students I would meet at Princeton were very similar to me in many respects, that they had many of the same fears and apprehensions as I did and that I wasn't alone in feeling nervous or overwhelmed. It was a huge help to return to Princeton already having a strong network of friends, especially the upperclassmen leaders that I knew I could turn to if I ever needed help.

The Frosh Trip provides an experience that is totally focused on the individual freshmen and their adjustment to Princeton. OA has led the way in developing a unique orientation curriculum that enhances the University orientation messages around diversity, social life and alcohol. The chart (page 8) illustrates the sustained growth of the program over the past forty years. This growth rate, primarily spread through 'word of mouth,' reflects a proven educational experience that students believe has great value.

Past 30 Years of Frosh Trip Participation

Year	Participants	Leaders	Total	Total in Class	% of Class	# of Trips
1982	230	45	275	1136	20.2%	23
1992	456	119	575	1136	40.1%	46
2002	602	189	791	1166	51.6%	71
2012	825	247	1072	1350	61.1%	98



Princeton recognizes the unique benefits that a small-group, intensive experience has in creating effective bonding between diverse members of the freshmen class and how the development of relationships over six days allows students to hold deeper and more productive conversations about important topics relating to the transition to college and being a member of the Princeton University community. The growth of the Frosh Trip to serve over 60% of the freshmen class has been a precipitating event in the University's consideration of expanding small-group orientation programs to the entire class. Research into pre-orientation programs has shown that participants in outdoor

adventure orientation programs show the most significant levels of social and interpersonal growth as compared to any other type of small-group pre-orientation program. ²

In terms of expanding freshmen orientation programming the Frosh Trip has the greatest capacity to accommodate the largest number of incoming freshmen and comparing the growth rate of Frosh Trip with Community Action over the past fifteen years students have shown a preference for the Outdoor Action experience. Thanks to the extensive infrastructure developed by Outdoor Action over the past forty years with additional resources it is possible for the Frosh Trip to accommodate significantly more freshmen. Starting in 2015, based in large part on the success of the OA Frosh Trip, the University intends for all freshmen to have a small group orientation experience which will require that the OA Frosh Trip be expanded. This will require training additional leaders each year and developing new trip activities and locations.

Diversity

By virtue of its sheer size the Frosh Trip brings together the largest number of freshmen in one experience. It is OA's goal for our participation to mirror the diversity of the class. Students always comment on how much the diversity of their groups enhanced their experience.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned was to keep an open mind and not to judge people. There were a wide range of personalities on my trip, from hard-core partiers to quiet geniuses to varsity athletes to talented musicians. Had I not been on the trip, I might have been tempted to judge the various people in my group at first glance. After spending a week in the wilderness with them, however, I learned that everyone made unique contributions to the group and that I had traits in common with everyone. The trip also helped to ease the fears I had about adjusting to college life, meeting new people, etc. It was a great experience!

Outdoor Action is without a doubt the most rewarding experience I found at Princeton in the way it taught me about myself and about others. In the first few days of getting to know my group, I encountered a greater variety of backgrounds and interests than I did all throughout high school. My leader said that's his favorite thing about OA: because such a large portion (over 60%) of the freshman class is represented, OA groups are the most eclectic on campus. For several of my OA friends with completely different activities and classes from me, I can't help but think how I probably would never have met them otherwise.

At the end of this year's frosh trip, I was really proud of the place that we had reached as a group. I had a really diverse group of freshmen this year— several international students and others with very interesting backgrounds, and all except for one were new to backpacking. We had managed to create a safe space in which everyone felt comfortable sharing personal things, and I took note of the special place that my frosh were in. They were out in the woods, but on their minds was Princeton, and college, and their changing lives. I got a sense from this particular group that they were eager to reflect on this transition and talk about it, and also to connect with others at a level that in many other contexts would be out of the ordinary.³

10

 $^{^2}$ Bell, B. (2008). College Students' Development of Social Support and its Relationship to Preorientation Experiences. Unpublished Dissertation, University of New Hampshire, Durham.

³ Gaya Morris '14

Over the past decade through the generous financial aid program provided by the University, diversifying program offerings to appeal to a broader range of students and through promoting diversity in all of our materials and presentation OA has done a remarkable job in extending its reach to the freshmen class as can be seen in the data from 2012 on page 10.

Leader Training Program

While Frosh Trip is the single largest part of Outdoor Action, there would be no Frosh Trip without highly trained leaders. The OA Leader Training Program which takes place in both the fall and spring semesters is the 'engine' that drives the rest of the program. Our goal is to expand this to even more students by fully funding the Leader Training Program.

I am proud to report that OA's student leaders are the most diverse of any Ivy League outdoor program. OA is unique in the Ivy League in that we encourage and accept *every* student who wants to train as an OA Leader. Our peer institutions limit the number of students who can become leaders. We believe that all students can benefit from the Leader Training program and should have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills through the training that OA offers. The principle that "anyone can become a leader" is a cornerstone of the program. As a result, OA has one of the most diverse pools of outdoor leaders of any college in the country and we can and must do even better at encouraging an even broader range of students to become leaders.

Teaching leadership is not a simple task. Becoming an Outdoor Action Leader is much more than learning technical skills. It requires mastering listening and communication, group facilitation, conflict management, and mentoring—all of which is taught through a values-oriented framework that encourages diversity and tolerance. We use this framework to develop the core values servant leadership that every student should learn.

OA Leaders receive the most extensive training of any student orientation leader. Residential College Advisors receive 60 hours of training. OA Leaders complete 150 hours of experientially-based training allowing them to practice their leadership skills in a supervised setting prior to assuming actual leadership responsibilities. Over half of the students who become OA Leaders had their first outdoor experience on the OA Frosh Trip. This illustrates how effective Frosh Trip is in encouraging incoming students to take on leadership roles on campus. Here is what some leaders have said about their leadership experience with Outdoor Action:

For me, the most important aspect of leadership is self-awareness: Understanding what I am doing and how my decisions will affect others. From self-awareness comes the ability to reflect, which is a crucial step towards improving one's leadership. Also tied with improvement is the ability to both give and receive constructive feedback on a leadership experience. Finally, a good leader demonstrates flexibility and resiliency; she is willing to adapt to new situations and is not fazed by successive challenges that seem impossible to overcome. With these five characteristics, an individual is prepared to respond to new situations and able to continually improve her course of action; anyone is able to follow a detailed list of tasks to accomplish a pre-determined goal, but strong leadership is necessary to overcome the new and unexpected situations.⁴

11

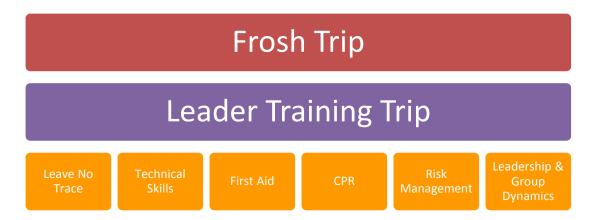
⁴ Caroline Stone '14

I think OA does it right. Our trip was successful not only because my Co-leader and I were trained well to lead, but because OA's strong foundations gave us frameworks to work with and adjust as we went along. Our trip had its fair share of challenges, but we were able to comfortably improvise to keep things safe and fun for our Frosh. I wish I could adequately describe how much OA has meant and means to me, but I don't think I can. At best I can say that it has helped me grow, made me feel like a part of an exciting and welcoming community, and shown me how it is possible to actually have (and witness) one's positive impact on another human being.⁵

The chart below illustrates the progression of student leadership development. The program starts with core skills that students need in order to safely lead and facilitate groups in the outdoors. These core skills are all taught by other students (Leave No Trace Master Educators, Technical Skills Instructors, First Aid Instructors, CPR Instructors and Leader Trainers). In order to teach each of these component areas teams of student instructors must be recruited, trained and supervised throughout the year.

The culminating training event is the six-day Leader Training Trip. This is led by the Leader Trainers, the most experienced leaders in the program who coach new leaders through experiential training and debriefing on how to effectively lead and manage a group.

The final stage of training, and for many their first real leadership experience, is leading a Frosh Trip the following fall. Creating more opportunities for students to lead trips during the year is essential to expand our cadre of Instructors and Leader Trainers. We are looking to partner with programs like the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning and Teacher Prep to help us make our leaders become even better teachers.

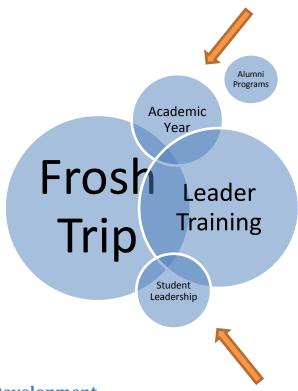


Scheduling flexibility is a key element in training the largest number of student leaders. Unlike our peer institutions who only offer leader training once a year OA offers multiple entry and completion options for students to become leaders. This greatly expands the number and diversity of student leaders so that athletes, students with religious observances, students involved in organizations can all work OA Leader Training into their schedules.

 $^{^{5}}$ Ben Denzer '15

Outdoor Action's Campus Activities

The Frosh Trip, the largest program within Outdoor Action, is 'fueled' by OA's second largest program, the Leader Training program. There are other aspects of Outdoor Action that take place during the academic year as depicted in the figure below. The biggest areas for potential expansion for Outdoor Action shown by the arrows are Student Leadership and Academic Year Programming.



Student Leadership Development

One of the unique aspects of OA is the role that OA Leaders play in every aspect of delivering the program. Training new student leaders is done almost entirely by other students and this peer-to-peer teaching is one of OA's most valuable learning experiences for the instructors. Students are trained in a variety of roles—CPR Instructor, First Aid Instructor, Technical Skills Trainer, Leave No Trace Master Educator, and Leader Trainer. These students design and manage curriculum, teach classes, grade and evaluate other students and provide them with feedback on their learning. In addition students operate the OA Climbing Wall and Equipment Room and the summer Frosh Trip Coordinators help plan the entire Frosh Trip. They aren't just leaders on the trail; leadership and teaching is something OA builds into every aspect of the program.

There is no doubt that Outdoor Action has been extremely entrepreneurial over the past forty years in "pushing the envelope" to find ways to further the goals of the University by developing innovative student leadership programs in partnership with other offices on campus. Here are a few programs developed by OA to support University initiatives:

• **Bridge Year Program:** OA developed and taught team building and leadership training workshops for the students participating in the Bridge Year Program. This program was

implemented by the OA Director for two years and has now been incorporated into the annual training program delivered by Bridge Year staff.

- **Residential College Advisors:** Over the past five years the OA Director has provided leadership training workshops to new Residential College Advisors as part of their orientation around their role as campus leaders.
- **Pace Center:** The Pace Center contracted the OA Director to provide leadership training programs for Pace senior staff as well as for student leaders involved in Pace Center activities as part of their effort to standardize the quality of leadership within Pace.
- Alcohol Education Training for Residential College Advisors and Eating Club Officers:
 Working in conjunction with Dr. Janet Neglia of University Health Services, the OA Director
 developed and jointly implemented training on Alcohol First Aid and Safety for Residential
 College Advisors and Eating Club Officers.
- **Team Building for Varsity Athletes:** OA has provided team building programs for a number of Varsity sports teams, particularly in their off-season training periods.
- **Religious Life Office:** OA working in collaboration with the Religious Life Office has developed Nature & Spirituality programs that allow students of different religious traditions to share their culture and experience of the natural world.

These programs are another positive contribution that Outdoor Action makes to the lives of students and they represent a huge untapped resource for student leadership development. With increased support, OA could provide a much broader range of customized experiential learning and leadership programs for undergraduates, campus programs and academic departments to further the educational mission of the University.

Program Activities during the Academic Year

In 1975, after the first successful Frosh Trip, the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students decided to expand Outdoor Action beyond Frosh Trip to offer activities throughout the academic year. This was a natural expansion based on maximizing the resources already developed for the Frosh Trip—trained leaders, staff supervision and equipment. From 1977 through 2001 Outdoor Action offered thousands of activities that included day trips, weekend trips, and multi-day trips over breaks as well as training classes, workshops, films and speakers series. Due to rising costs and limited funds to subsidize these trips OA was forced to eliminate these activities in 2001.

Over the past several years students have expressed significant student interest in returning to offering trips and activities during the academic year. In 2011 OA won a \$10,000 grant from the Polartec Corporation to support such activities and OA has used this grant to fund a number of very successful trips and activities demonstrating that there is great interest in more OA activities. With the number of trained leaders and the organizational infrastructure that is already in place for Frosh Trip it makes sense to utilize those resources during the year to provide activities for students, graduate students and the campus at large.

Trips during the academic year also provide opportunities for the diverse mixing of students that takes place on Frosh Trip to occur throughout the year and allows students to take a break from the academic demands of Princeton. Having a range of trip options during the year creates new entry points into the

program for students who did not participate in Frosh Trip and expand participation of students from diverse backgrounds.

Funding

Over the past forty years OA has accomplished an amazing amount with limited resources. When it began in 1973 Outdoor Action was a pilot program, an idea with great merit that was funded almost entirely through student fees. Over the past four decades OA has grown so that 60 percent of all current undergraduates have participated. Since 1981, as the size of the program has expanded, the operating costs of Outdoor Action have increased from about \$200,000 annually to over \$650,000. Currently 80 percent of the OA budget is derived from student fees with 10 percent coming from direct University support, and 10 percent from alumni donations.

Our goal is for Outdoor Action to be able to provide the best possible learning and leadership development experience for the largest number of Princeton students. In order to achieve this goal we need to build annual funds for Outdoor Action that provide the necessary resources for all students to be able to participate in leader training, trips during the academic year and the Frosh Trip program.

Opportunities

The following recommendations present the opportunities for Outdoor Action to fully achieve its mission and to support the University's goals for orientation and student leadership development over the next five to ten years.

- Well-trained student leaders are the core of the program so OA must provide the best professional training and ongoing supervision for student leaders.
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