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Program Description

Introduction

Canadian universities in the 21st century face the challenges of lower enrolments, enhanced global competition and the desire to increase and foster diversity. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) has issued a report indicating the Ontario university system will begin to follow a model of differentiation defined on the basis of structure, type of programs offered, how research and teaching are provided, institutional status and student composition (Rae, 2005). Simultaneously, there is also a move toward greater accountability and the development of performance indicators (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE) that determine whether universities are meeting the outcomes expected of them – including academic performance and student retention.

One strategy to enhance student academic success and promote student retention, driven by statistics that indicate that over 20% of students who enter university fail to complete their degrees (Finnie & Qiu, 2009), are first-year or pre-term orientation programs (Hollins, 2009). The goals of these orientation programs are to educate incoming students and foster the development of peer networks that will lead to higher levels of academic performance, emotional and social maturity, a more positive view of the institution, and enhanced student retention. These first year programs have historically been delivered as classroom-based, theory-oriented courses, seminars and/or support group interventions (Lamothe et al., 1995; Tinto, 1997). Over the past several decades in the United States, a number of universities have adopted an alternative approach to orientation program delivery – one that includes a wilderness component designed to enhance personal growth (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996), positive peer relationships (Gass et al., 2003), academic performance (Oldmixon, 2007), and enhanced student retention (Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Barefoot and Koch (2011) report that over 20% of the 1,300 public and private colleges and universities they surveyed offered pre-term orientation programs with a wilderness or outdoor education component.

In Canada, there has been a history of outdoor orientation programs across the country that has seen a resurgence of interest since the launch of Brock BaseCamp in August 2010. Brock BaseCamp offers rock climbing, backpacking and canoeing trips for incoming first-year students prior to the start of the Fall term. Using a cooperative learning model based on social-interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), student trip leaders (current third or fourth-

year Brock students) deliver a curriculum designed to address the following topics: academic success, diversity, making healthy choices, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, and living responsibly in the academic community.

Description of the Program of Scholarship

The purpose of this program of scholarship is to examine the longitudinal effects of participation in Brock BaseCamp and follow-up experiences on the academic performance of two distinct groups of students. These include: 1) first-year student participants and, 2) BaseCamp trip leaders. In each year of this study, the researchers will recruit 20 BaseCamp first-year students and 6 BaseCamp trip leaders as participants.

Year 1 – First-Year Students. There are three distinct components of this program of scholarship with first-year students. First, a primary element is five, bi-monthly follow-up workshops on each of the topic areas addressed in the Brock BaseCamp curriculum (e.g., academic success, diversity, making healthy choices, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, and living responsibly in the academic community). The workshops are offered on Saturdays in September, November, January, late February, and April. These six to eight-hour workshops include two distinct components. First, experiential and collaborative learning modules (1.5 to 2 hours in length) are offered to students to further explore the subject areas mentioned above. These learning modules are developed as part of this program of scholarship. Following the learning modules, students have the opportunity to participate in an outdoor recreation activity such as canoeing on the old Welland Canal, rock climbing at Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area, bouldering at the Niagara Glen, or snowshoeing in Short Hills Provincial Park. By the end of this portion of the program, first-year students will show increased perceptions of social connection and social support as measured by the Brief Sense of Community Index (Long & Perkins, 2003) and Campus Focused Social Provisions Scale (Bell, 2006). Additionally, they will show increased perceptions of ability to succeed as measured by the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (Neill, Marsh, & Richards, 2003) and academic success measured by program of study retention and academic grade average. As part of this portion of the project, appropriate methods of quantitatively measuring the impact of these workshops on these students' connection to, and affinity for Brock University will be identified and implemented. Individual interviews and focus group discussions are part of this process. Finally, the outdoor recreation activities promote healthy, active lifestyles among students and offer them the opportunity to experience local natural areas.

A second element for first-year students in the first year of the program is to develop and offer a series of four short evening workshops (two per semester) on critical reflection using blogs, video, VoiceThreads (A collaborative, multimedia online “slide show” that allows students to upload images, documents, and videos and permits group members to leave comments by voice (with a mic or telephone), by text or audio file, or via a webcam video), and journal formats. Researchers have found that reflective journaling can have a powerful impact on the development of critical thinking skills, particularly after an experience similar to Brock BaseCamp (Dyment & O’Connell, 2008; 2011). Through these more deliberate learning processes, these forms of reflection support the manner through which students arrive at their understanding of a topic (Boud, 2001; Nesoff, 2004), and exemplify that understanding in a meaningful way (Dunlap, 2006; Moon, 2006). By the end of this portion of the program, students will show increased critical thinking skills as evident through the “depth” of their reflective entries in their blogs, journals, or other reflective format. “Depth” of reflection will be

determined by the researchers applying Valli's (1997) typology of reflective thought to individual students' reflective work. It is hoped that these workshops will: encourage students to integrate their understanding of and apply the BaseCamp curriculum to their overall program of study at Brock; provide first-year students with critical thinking and analyses skills important to academic success; and expose them to multimedia forms of critical discourse.

The final element of the program for first-year students is to develop and promote the notion of a "living-learning community" with their peers from Brock BaseCamp trips. Living-learning communities have been shown to positively impact first semester GPA, retention, and overall first-year experience (Stassen, 2003). At present, to the knowledge of the researchers, there are no living-learning communities of this nature at Brock University. A living-learning community will be established through the workshops and outdoor recreation activities mentioned above, as well as through the researchers encouraging social and academic connections outside of the program. As part of this process, the researchers hold special office hours to assist students with their academic studies. Additionally, as part of this proposed program, the researchers will approach Residence Services to explore the possibility of creating a designated floor in a residence hall to truly implement a living-learning community in Years 2 and 3 of the program. In this model, BaseCamp students could choose to live together, which would promote social-interdependence and collaborative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), enhance sense of community, and encourage social supports at Brock. It is anticipated that these efforts will improve student academic performance and increase student retention and timely degree completion.

Year 1 – BaseCamp Trip Leaders. The program of scholarship with BaseCamp trip leaders also includes three distinct components. The first elements will assist these students in making connections among and between their academic course content and the "real life practice" of leadership and facilitation through participation in the bi-monthly activities mentioned above. Working with the researchers, BaseCamp trip leaders will design and deliver the workshop curriculum. By the end of the first year of the program, trip leaders will demonstrate an enhanced understanding of the links between theory and practice, be provided the opportunity for reflective learning with peers, and also be a part of the living-learning community. Methods of measuring these impacts will be identified and implemented as part of the program of scholarship.

A second, and related, element of the proposed program is to develop and implement customized learning models for student leaders for the outdoor recreation component of the program. Working with the researchers, students will identify areas of growth and design learning strategies to reach these goals. For example, a student leader may wish to learn more about group facilitation and debriefing techniques. As part of the outdoor recreation component, this student leader can research, design, implement (during one of the bi-monthly workshops) and evaluate an experiential lesson for him or herself under the guidance of the researchers. The intent of this portion of the program is to enhance student leaders' personal and professional growth and development, increase retention and affinity for Brock, and promote academic success through a deeper understanding of effective pedagogic practices. These items will be measured through individual interviews with student leaders and through review of student leaders' performance in delivering their workshop and outdoor recreation activities/lessons.

A final element for BaseCamp trip leaders is to design and offer "advanced" workshops on critical reflection using journals, blogs, VoiceThread or video formats described for first-year students. This is important for third and fourth year students as critical reflection fosters

metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” “thinking about learning,” or “thinking about professional process” (O’Connell & Dymont, 2011). Advanced training in reflection is important as it can take up to three years for university students to become proficient at reflective thought (Epp, 2008). The goals of this portion of the proposed program are to assist BaseCamp trip leaders in creating links to current and future practice, and enhance their understanding of theoretical aspects of group dynamics, pedagogical practice, and outdoor leadership. The success of this portion of the program will be measured by the researchers application of Valli’s (1997) typology of reflection to their reflective work.

Year 2 & 3 – First Year Students. The program for students from the previous year (Cohort A) will consist of the same elements as the first year. First, the bi-monthly workshops with outdoor recreation activities will continue. However, the content of the workshops will be co-created by the cohort to meet their evolving needs and may involve facilitation and training by experts outside the research team. The goals for this portion of the program and evaluation techniques remain the same. Ongoing work with reflective praxis will continue through evening workshops on advanced reflective techniques and application of reflective practice to individual students’ academic program of study. In terms of the living-learning community, it is hoped that a residence hall living option will be in place. If so, the researchers will hold specific office hours in the dedicated residence area to support students in their studies. These “office hours” may take the form of coffee houses, dinners, or other events which serve the dual purpose of creating faculty support for student learning as well creating community through the social aspect of these functions. Outcomes will be measured using similar techniques to those outlined above.

The program outlined above for Cohort A will be implemented with Cohort B, comprised of “new” first-year students who enter Brock and participate in a Brock BaseCamp trip in the second year of the proposed program. A unique feature of the program for this year is the potential opportunity to enter the living-learning community in a designated part of a residence hall from the first year of the students’ academic career. The researchers will conduct interviews and compare quantitative scores between Cohort A and Cohort B to determine if any differences exist. In the third year of this proposed program, Cohort C will be added to the research program. It is anticipated that some members of Cohorts A and B will transition to become BaseCamp student leaders during this time.

Year 2 & 3 – BaseCamp Trip Leaders. The proposed program for trip leaders from the previous year (Cohort A) will consist of the same elements as the first year, with a particular focus on the development of advanced individualized learning modules. These will be co-created by the trip leader and researchers. It is important to note, however, that the turnover of trip leaders will be higher than trip participants as many trip leaders will graduate after only one year as a trip leader. If a designated area in a residence hall is established for a living-learning community, trip leaders will be offered the option to live with the community as well. Outcomes will be measured using techniques as outlined in the Year 1 plan as above.

In conclusion, the goal of the program of scholarship is to examine the longitudinal effects of participation in Brock BaseCamp programs on first-year student participants and trip leaders. Additionally, the program of scholarship will expand on core BaseCamp activities (summer trips) to include follow-up programs including various evening and bi-monthly workshops, establishing a living-learning community, and through participation in outdoor recreation activities. It is anticipated the program will positively affect sense of community, academic success, student retention, and affinity for the institution.