



# Using Experiential Learning Opportunities to Build Sustainable Peer Networks through Outdoor Orientation Programs to Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being

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## Background

- ◆ University students are particularly susceptible to challenges to their mental health (Romeo et al., 2024).
- ◆ Co-curricular learning activities with peer mentors promote a sense of belonging (Liu et al., 2022) and foster social support (Sharp, 2021) that strengthens student mental well-being (Reis et al., 2022).
- ◆ Outdoor Orientation Programs (OOPs) provide experiential learning opportunities that support peer mentorship which is important for improved academic and social support for students (Dempsey, 2020).

## Objective

- ◆ An exploration of the impact of an experiential peer-led OOP on student mental health and well-being, the objective is to examine peer network interactions between student-leaders and student participants during and after their OOP experience, and how these experiences influenced their perceptions of self-efficacy and wellness in their post-trip lives.

## Qualitative Methods

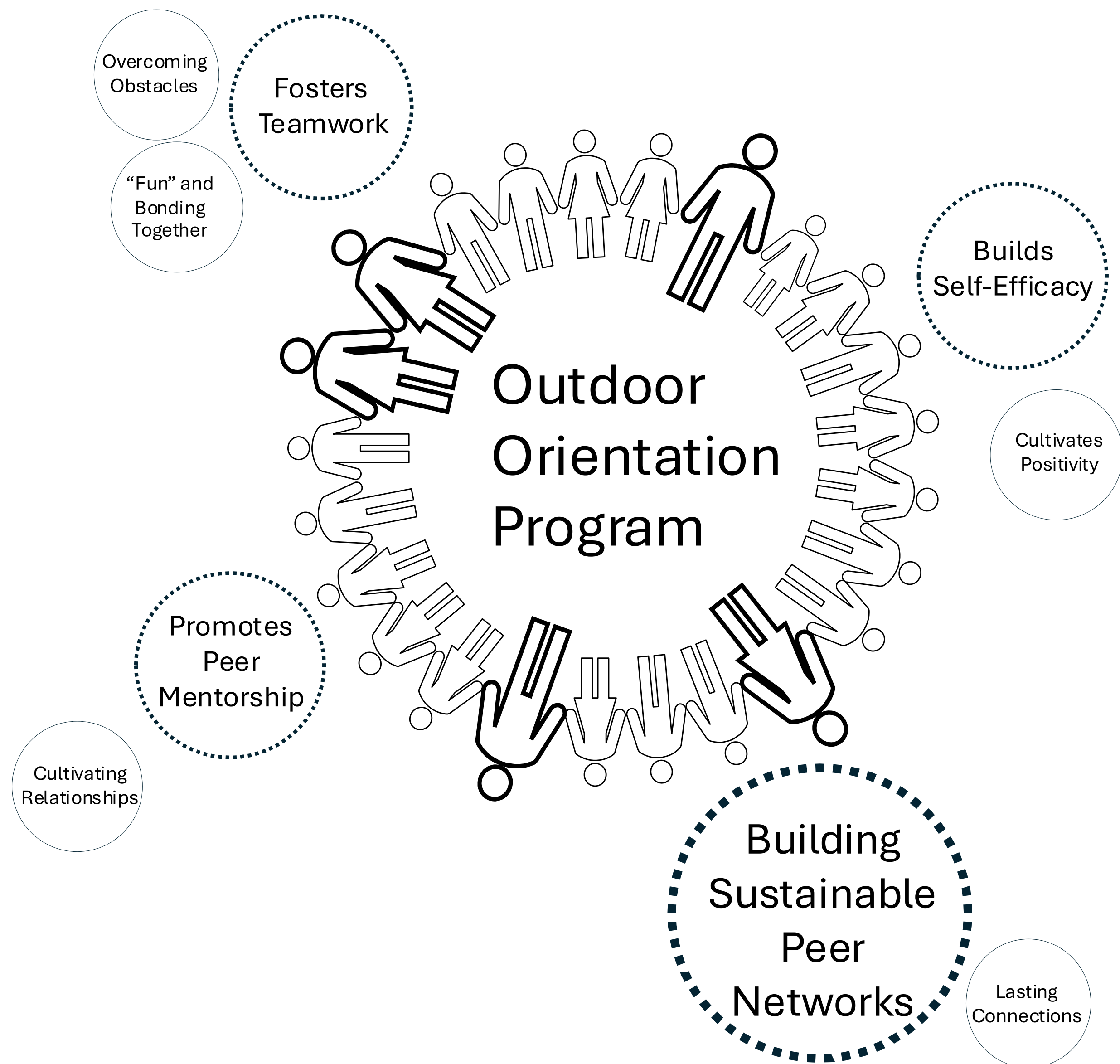
Year of Study	Data Source	Qualitative Measures
2022	Retrospective, Informant Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• student participants and peer leaders from canoeing, backpacking, or rock climbing OOP from 2011-2019</li></ul>	Informant Alumni Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contextual understanding of informant lived experience with peer learning in OOP</li><li>• understand impact on mental health and well-being</li></ul>
2024	Archival Documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• peer leader reflective journals from from canoeing, backpacking, or rock climbing OOP from 2017-2019</li></ul>	Reflective Journals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• written by peer leaders and OOP student participants</li><li>• experiences with OOP</li><li>• experiences with peers</li></ul>

## Case study Methodology

- ◆ This case study uses an interpretive approach with qualitative forms of evidence (Yin, 2014) to collect retrospective and archival data on the impact of a peer led OOP on student wellbeing in higher education.
- ◆ Constant comparison analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019) of informant interviews and documents iteratively analyzed using a thematic analysis method that included open coding, focused coding, and conceptualization.
- ◆ The research team engaged in critical discussions, using an iterative process of comparison between codes and categories, until research intercoder agreement was achieved and theme saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2020)

## Results

- ◆ 15 alumni informants who shared an experiential OOP, ranging in age from 21-36 participated in interviews; 4 male, 10 female, 1 Gender Fluid.
- ◆ 19 reflective journals; 16 journals from peer leaders and 3 from OOP student participants.



**Figure 1.** The peer-to-peer learning that occurred as a result of a shared OOP experience that fostered sustainable peer networks which support student mental health and well-being.

## Emerging Themes

Theme	Quotation
1. Fosters Teamwork -Overcoming obstacles -“Fun” and bonding together	“we all helped each other” (Student 1)  “Our campers are really starting to build relationships and bond together. Today we completed our hardest portage yet and it really brought our group together” (Leader 4).
2. Promotes Peer Mentorship -Cultivating Relationships	“It was very different I guess to see people of authority in that relaxed leadership role. And I remember thinking, oh my gosh you are in 4 <sup>th</sup> or 5 <sup>th</sup> year, and I am going to see you in the halls, and we have done all these things together. I am going to say hi and university is going to be such a different experience now” (Participant 14).
3. Builds Self-Efficacy -Cultivates positivity	“Cheering people on when it was their first time, that was a blast to do. And to coach them up the wall and see them accomplish it, it makes you feel really good about yourself” (Participant 12).
4. Building Sustainable Peer Networks -Lasting connections	“I think it increases your opportunity to build supports because these individuals are friends that you have made outside of the specific experience at school” (Participant 7).

## Implications

- ◆ Given that OOP leaders in our experiential program were upper year students or recent graduates, and OOP participants were current or incoming students, this provided a space for peer-to-peer connections to be nurtured and, importantly, sustained beyond the OOP experience.
- ◆ This allowed for strengthened connections with lasting social support systems that extended well beyond graduation.
- ◆ These support systems fostered a sense of belonging in students that promote and strengthen student mental health and well-being.

## References

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