

Program Assessment Report Outdoor Studies: 2023-2024

Program 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 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 Environmental Studies BA. All programs include outdoor risk management, leadership, specific outdoor skills, environmental philosophy and literature, and academic electives.

The Outdoor Skills and Leadership Certificate is an intensive 34 credit, ten-month program designed for upper-division students. Many students complete the program while on academic exchange and others come to the program after completing bachelor's level degrees. The program is designed for students interested in becoming outdoor professionals, achieving more general goals related to personal development and leadership, or to achieve a better understanding of themselves and the natural world. It is particularly suited for students who wish to complete the certificate in combination with an independent degree program.

The Outdoor and Adventure Studies Designated Emphasis in the BLA is designed for students interested in a multidisciplinary course of academic study that is grounded in the humanities and specializes in outdoor skills and adventure leisure studies.

The ODS Environmental Studies Emphasis is designed for students interested in pursuing and environmental studies with specialization in outdoor skills and recreation/leisure studies. The Environmental Studies BA is part (along with the Environmental Resources BS and the Environmental Science BS) of the Program on the Environment.

Program Learning Outcomes

The ODS program level learning outcomes are derived from the program's core values. Each core value has a learning outcome associated with it.

Core Value 1: Informed Understanding of Outdoor Activities

The ODS program is committed to the idea that those who work in the outdoor industry, or who seriously recreate in the outdoors, should have an understanding of, and continually reflect upon, the history of, cultural influences, and environmental factors relating to, outdoor recreation and activities.

Associated Learning Outcome

PLO 1: ODS Graduates will be able to describe various outdoor activities in terms of their historical development, environmental implications, and related social issues.

Core Value 2: Proficiency 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.

Associated Learning Outcome

PLO 2: By the time they complete their program, ODS program graduates should be able to lead groups in at least two activity areas (such as climbing, hiking, backcountry skiing or kayaking) as an entry-level professional in the outdoor industry.

Core Value 3: Excellence in Critical Inquiry

The ODS program seeks to develop students into inquisitive critical thinkers with ability to do interdisciplinary academic work in a variety of fields.

Associated Learning Outcome

PLO 3: ODS graduates should be able to demonstrate the ability to critically evaluate practices relating to outdoor activities, nature-oriented tourism, and nature sports, in an informed way, using methodologies and techniques of the humanities, natural, or social sciences.

PLO's within the three ODS Programs

While the three ODS degree tracks share these student learning outcomes, the programs differ in what is emphasized. Students in the certificate program spend proportionately more time in the field than students in the BA and BLA programs. The BLA in outdoor and adventure studies emphasizes humanities-based approaches to studying outdoor activities. And, the Environmental Studies BA includes more courses from the natural sciences. In assessing the effectiveness of non-ODS, discipline-specific, coursework, we rely on the expertise of faculty in specific areas. That said, we are also concerned with assessing how well ODS programing fits into, complements, and is complemented by, the non-ODS-specific curriculum in the BLA and Environmental Studies BA. We assess this primarily in our exit interviews with students.

Catalogue Updates

The PLO's currently listed in the academic catalogue are not correct. The learning outcomes listed for the Certificate in Outdoor Skills and Leadership need to be updated. The learning outcomes listed in the BLA and environmental studies reflect the general learning outcomes for both of those degrees. However, the ODS-specific tracks in each degree contain distinct curriculum with learning outcomes that are not captured by the general program outcomes. The current informational structure in these sections of the catalogue does not easily lend itself to adding the specific program learning outcomes. As a related issue, the section describing the requirements for the ODS track in the Environmental Studies BA is particularly difficult to follow. Students, and advisors, have reported finding it difficult to understand what the program requirements are. We think that we can fix these problems and will work to do this over the next year.

Assessment Tools

We will use two primary tools to assess our program's success in learning outcomes

1. Exit interviews
2. Observations during capstone

Exit Interviews

During or just after our final capstone field expedition we conduct exit interviews with graduating students. Students are asked to reflect on their goals and expectations coming into the program. They are asked whether the program met, failed to meet, or exceeded expectations. They are asked what they felt the best and worst parts of the program were for them, and what changes they recommend for the program.

Summary of Exit Interviews

Prior to fall of 2024, there were two principal ODS faculty members. Kevin Krein was on sabbatical during AY 2023-2024. Forest Wagner left UAS prior to the start of the fall term 2024 term. Unfortunately, we are currently unable to locate exit interviews from the past year. That said, answers to exit interview questions have been fairly consistent over many years. We plan to continue to collect them.

Instructor Evaluations from Capstone Course:

Instructors in the outdoor studies program spend a significant amount of time interacting directly with students and working with them in the classroom and in the field. During our capstone field expeditions program instructors provide a final assessment of graduating students in four areas that correspond to our core values: professional behavior, hard skills, soft skills, and informed understanding of outdoor activities. In the area of professional behavior, we evaluate students' preparedness, leadership, confidence, and composure in field environments. In the area of hard skills, we evaluate students' technical proficiency in a variety of discipline-specific activities. In the area of soft skills, we evaluate students' critical thinking, decision making, communication, and judgment. Informed understanding of outdoor activities concerns students' 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 of Instructors' Evaluations of Students

Professional Behavior: 3.2

Hard Skills: 3.6

Soft Skills: 2.9

Informed Understanding of Outdoor Activities: 3.9

Professional Behavior and Soft Skills: What was particularly apparent was that students had a very difficult time maintaining a healthy working atmosphere. This included some students refusing to work or cook with others and refusing to support each other in cooperative tasks.

Hard Skills: While students performed better in the hard skills areas, it was also apparent that maintaining a higher level of physical fitness would help some of the students perform better in the field.

Informed understanding of Outdoor Activities: This is an area in which we feel that the program is doing a very good job and the majority of students are reaching the standards indicated by the learning outcomes.

Conclusions

ODS faculty meet regularly during the academic year in order to make decisions about how to improve the program. Given the above analysis of students' performance in the areas of professional behavior and soft skills, we decided that, in all classes we should work to create opportunities to provide regular feedback to students on their performance in this area and that it would be formally assessed in all classes. As well, it was decided that the Outdoor Leadership and Studies course should put more emphasis on professional behavior and the foundations of soft skills.

We also had a number of discussions about how to help students physically train as part of the ODS program. One solution was the addition of a backcountry skiing class in the spring term. This was somewhat successful in the spring of 2025, but it only met in the spring term and it met a limited number of times. What the students need is a training plan with regular workouts. There are, of course, students who already train regularly, and, as one would expect, these are not the students who need to improve in this area. One great solution would be to have ODS students and faculty train as a group. We offered a proposal that would allow faculty to train with students at the rec center, but did not find the rec center supportive. We continue to look for other solutions.

Much attention will be spent in the coming year on hiring a faculty member to fill the vacancy left by Forest Wagner. Still, we plan to update the PLO's in the catalogue as well as make revisions to the presentation of program requirements in the catalogue.