



Risk Management Continues to Evolve at ALCS

“Learning from experience” doesn’t mean that we can learn only from our *own* experiences—and to that end, ALCS is more and more trying to learn from the accumulated experiences of other outdoor-education programs. Although the rigorous process for applying for Association for Experiential Education accreditation will require at least three years’ investment and lot of hard questions, the staff at ALCS committed in May 2016 to pursue AEE accreditation with the intent not only to keep our students and staff healthy in the field but to become an exemplary experiential-education program.

By spending so much time out of the classroom and in the field—whether in the Gila Wilderness, on a First Nations reservation, or swimming with green sea turtles in Puerto Rico—we put ourselves at greater risk than students and staff who are part of more conventional public-school programs. But we believe that remaining in a classroom for 40 hours a week is far riskier for the soul (and body), so we continue to explore the world outside our school building, where most genuine education takes place. And because we have made that commitment to experiential education, we must do everything we can to evaluate and manage the risks we take. ALCS continues to make a deliberate, conscientious commitment to risk management by training staff, implementing consistent, vetted policies, and subjecting ourselves to outside review—because we know that’s what makes our program better.

Here are some key points worth noting:

- In May 2016, Michael Lindsey, of Outdoor Recreation Risk Management Consulting, performed a thorough review of our program that included three days onsite and many more days reviewing our documents. With decades of experience in the field and a current affiliation with the Association for Experiential Education, Michael was able to recognize our strengths while at the same time making recommendations for managing our risks even more effectively. During his site visit, Michael conducted thorough interviews with the school director, 10 staff members, and 18 students. He shared his findings with the director in a comprehensive and very helpful report, which the director in turn shared with staff. From that report came the key items on the ALCS Risk Management Committee’s agenda for this year and next.
- In light of Mr. Lindsey’s recommendations, we are reviewing our entire program, examining our open-water swimming policies, for instance; our bicycle training and maintenance

program; evaluating (and perhaps replacing) equipment, like MSR stoves, that pose a potential risk to students and staff; and training staff to administer emergency medicines like epinephrine and glucagon in the field.

- Last year we began an “Incident Log,” wherein the Risk Management Committee reviewed student and staff injuries and potential safety risks in a deliberate and timely manner. In the past, such incidents were recorded and reviewed at year’s end, but now they will be reviewed monthly at our Risk Management Committee meetings (and weekly by the Risk Management Coordinator, in consultation with the School Director).
- Currently, we have on staff four teachers who have received the demanding two-week Wilderness First Responder training and certification from the Wilderness Medicine Institute, the nation’s premier WFR trainer. Worth noting: this certification requires WFRs to attend a 3-day refresher course every two years to keep skills strong and current.
- We continue to constantly review major policies, like our Emergency Action Plan and our Backpacking Safety Guidelines. This academic year will see the completion of the Experiential Education Policy and Procedure Manual (based on Outward Bound’s *Staff Manual*) and the implementation of that plan through staff training. By engaging the services of experiential-ed and risk-management consultants and allying ourselves with organizations possessed of long and honorable records of best practices in outdoor education, we hope to become, in time, a model for schools with missions similar to ours.

As I write, a roomful of staff and community volunteers have assembled in our library for a course in Basic Life Support and CPR. Our commitment to operating safely in the backcountry—and frontcountry—is not new, and we have responded to major incidents in the past, as when we put our Backpacking Safety Plan through a major overhaul in 2012. One of the initiatives born of that review was our annual Backpacking Base Camp, which this year expanded to a third day of outdoor safety, fitness, and first-aid training that prepares students for our September wilderness backpacking trips.

That being said, it is often the assumptions that have never been challenged that take us by surprise and thrust us into a new level of understanding. As best we can, we strive to expect the unexpected, to be honest in our self-evaluations, and always to rely on the expertise of others with long experience in the exhilarating and always risky world of outdoor experiential education. Above all, we seek healthy risks for our students and staff.

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