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The High Sierra Effect:  
The Impact of a Living-Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Chickering is a well respected educational researcher who proposed that students develop their identity by moving through a series of seven vectors. Chickering's theory has been widely respected, supported and upheld by student affairs professionals largely because it accounts for emotional, interpersonal, ethical and intellectual development of each student. High Sierra, an off-campus program of Azusa Pacific University, has long claimed to greatly influence students' lives. Twelve interviews with students who have chosen to spend more than one semester at High Sierra revealed that students were influenced by their experiences in the High Sierra program; they were challenged to navigate some of the vectors proposed by Arthur Chickering as they come to a better understanding of self and purpose.

### Effects of the High Sierra Program on Traditional College Students

The High Sierra Semester mission stated that the goal of High Sierra is to “help facilitate the student’s personal growth and development spiritually, academically, socially, emotionally and physically.” When the holistic development model of High Sierra is achieved it is no small wonder that students walk away from a semester of study in the mountains greatly influenced and changed. One on one interviews with twelve High Sierra students allowed for candid discussion about students growth and development while involved in the program. Through the review of these interviews researchers identified common themes and ideas as students worked towards establishing their identity. Specifically, researchers identified three of Chickering’s vectors as being the primary areas of influence for students participating in the High Sierra Semester.

### Descriptive Information

In the Fall of 2008, twelve alumnus from the High Sierra Semester were interviewed to ascertain the impact of the program on their lives. Each interviewee had decided to return to High Sierra for at least a second semester. Eight of the twelve interviewed were in the midst of their second or third semester experience, and four of those had yet to return to Azusa Pacific University’s main campus after their High Sierra experience. Seven of the subjects were male and five were female. Seven of the subject had their first experience with High Sierra during their freshmen year of college while the other five first experienced High Sierra as a sophomore.

Beyond the basics, the group of interviewed students was fairly homogenous. Nine of the twelve cited outdoor opportunities as one of the primary motivations for applying to the program initially. All but one of the subjects cited small community as one of the principal expectations

they held for the program as they entered into this unique experience and all of the students found the opportunity for close community at High Sierra. Further, all of the students expressed a belief and faith in Jesus Christ and all subscribe to a Christian faith; one of the subjects self-identified as a Catholic. Finally many of the subjects served as leaders within the High Sierra community; five of the twelve in formal leadership roles and all students through informal leadership roles because returners are often expected to model to others how to navigate High Sierra successfully.

The students who participated in this study were invited to be a part of the study because they participated in the semester long experience more than once. Over the past year, High Sierra has been boasting a nearly 15% return rate for students. With a growing number of returners coming back to the High Sierra campus, researchers recognized a unique opportunity to gain an inside perspective on students' experience. The disadvantage of selecting students who have already attended High Sierra at least once before is that, largely, their experiences were positive and they had already developed connections with the researchers which may have resulted in some bias.

#### Bracketing your perspective

The research team for this study is comprised of two women; both profess to be Christians and are currently employed by Azusa Pacific University's High Sierra Semester. The remote location of the High Sierra campus and the current employment of both researchers are the primary reasons for the researchers' interest in this study. Researchers are currently enrolled in the College Counseling and Student Development, formerly College Student Affairs, master's program at Azusa Pacific University. Both researchers are graduates from Christian universities,

Vanguard University and Azusa Pacific University, and one of the researchers was a student in the High Sierra program herself.

While the researchers sought to avoid bias in the course of their study it was, admittedly, nearly impossible to completely eliminate all partiality as both researchers hold significant personal, emotional and professional ties to the program under evaluation. As previously stated one of the researchers spent two semesters in the High Sierra program as a student herself. The student voices seen throughout this report speak for themselves but often reflect similar feelings to those held by the researcher based on her own personal experience with High Sierra.

In recognizing the deep seeded connections of the researchers to the High Sierra Semester it is necessary to note that because both researchers are currently employed by the program all interviewees have personal relationships with the researchers. All of the students interviewed have spent significant time in a small community setting with the researchers. On a daily basis, researchers invited students to be a part of their lives as they worked and lived on the High Sierra campus. Some of the students interviewed have served in student leadership positions that require them to meet regularly with one of the researchers in a one-on-one mentoring type relationship. Still others have sought out mentoring relationships with one of the researchers. In short, researchers have spent a great deal of time in close community with the interviewees therefore the names have been changed in an effort to protect their identities.

### Analysis of Themes

The nature of these interviews made coding in broad strokes extremely easy for the researchers. In answering the questions students generally returned to ten different ideas; spiritual growth and expectations, small community, interpersonal challenges, rigorous academics, wilderness experiences, leadership development, feelings of unfinished business, the

ability to be yourself, unsure of what to expect and holistic development/ integration. Nearly every student touched, in some aspect, on each of these topics making the primary challenge for researchers to move beyond the obvious general themes elicited through the interview questions. As researchers struggled to set aside personal bias and hear the actual voices of students, the primary themes of challenge and growth in each aspect of holistic development arose time and time again.

In regards to the academic rigor of High Sierra, Matthew, currently a senior at Azusa Pacific University, stated that “I knew it would probably be the hardest semester at APU, which probably turned out to be true.” Matthew was not alone in his assessment of the academics at High Sierra. Every student interviewed anticipated being challenged by the classes and professors at High Sierra. The core classes were built around the study of the great works of history, literature, philosophy, art and church history. The classes were discussion based and students were asked to wrestle with timeless questions posed through the humanities. Faculty maintained high classroom expectations for students and despite being challenged students identified academics as one of the reasons they desired to return for a second or third semester. Kristie, a junior currently participating in her second High Sierra semester, exclaimed “I wanted to come back for the academics, too; I was really excited about that.”

Perhaps the primary reason students seem to have fallen in love with the academics at High Sierra is because of the integrated fashion in which they are presented. Faculty members tag teamed a lecture series, known to students as plenary, that each student was required to attend as it aims to assist students in making connections across disciplines. In short students learned the impact of philosophers on authors and artists and vice versa. Lizzie, a junior at Azusa Pacific, perhaps stated it most clearly: “Something you are learning in another class relates to this class

and just realizing that all your academics do tie together ... That has helped me in returning to APU, to really do that, to find places where my classes connect.” The integrated academic model of High Sierra challenged students to find connections, think critically and think outside their box. Our research shows that a majority of students walked away from the semester with a renewed desire and new perspective of learning and education.

Because of the unique location of the High Sierra campus students were offered the opportunity to explore outdoor activities and, as previously stated, students often cited outdoor opportunities as the first thing that attracted them to the program. Each student who partook in the High Sierra experience was required to embark on a five or six day backpacking trip known as Trek. Interviews revealed that this experience was a source of excitement and also cause for anxiety because it was something so different than anything the students had experienced before. Janine, a sophomore currently enrolled in the High Sierra semester, expressed being “Extremely concerned because I didn’t feel like I was physically capable of carrying the pack on my back, with all the gear and clothes and food that I would need,” a concern shared by many students. It was widely accepted that Trek would be physically demanding and, like the academics, would require them to step out of their comfort zone. Trek repeatedly appeared as a highlight of each student’s experience while at High Sierra

When asked if she ever regretted her decision to participate in High Sierra, Lizzie conceded, “There were times on Trek where I was wondering what the heck I was thinking.” In the end, however, Lizzie acknowledged that because she pushed herself in the outdoors and allowed others to push her, she discovered that she was capable of more than she thought and that knowledge made all the hard times worthwhile. Lizzie was not the only one to be challenged on Trek. Despite the physical challenge, students seemed to fall in love with the mountains; their

beauty and their simplicity. More often than not the students interviewed had adopted outdoor lifestyles in which they had found themselves continually called to the mountains.

The physical challenge of Trek also fostered an opportunity for spiritual growth as students were forced to, in the words of Joseph a current junior at High Sierra, “Learn how to trust God, because if something goes wrong you may be able to get out in time and you may not. So you really have to learn pretty quickly that God is in control of your life.” Students were forced to come face to face with the reality of their own physical limitations and their lack of control over life in the wilderness. For many students this was a harsh but important lesson to learn and be reminded of since, for Christians, the ability to rest in God’s promises and good will is an important discipline. Trek also offered students the opportunity to practice the discipline of silence and solitude, as students were expected to spend twelve to twenty-four hours alone. Time and time again students reported this single experience as playing a pivotal role in their spiritual journey during their time at High Sierra. Students learned the value of slowing down and enjoying silence and often expressed frustration at not being able to find the same silence in Los Angeles when they returned to the main campus. Students also relished the opportunity to worship God through his creation, environments that had yet to be touched by human hands

Trek was not the only spiritual growth opportunity for students during their semester at High Sierra. Many of the students identified the opportunity to integrate faith with academic or intellectual conversations as a primary catalyst for spiritual growth. All students were expected to be a part of a small group Bible study as a part of their chapel requirement, and many of the students were offered additional spiritual growth opportunities above and beyond chapel. Sam, a sophomore currently taking classes at High Sierra, amalgamated the feelings of many students when he stated that these “Events were good because they stopped you every week and made

you contemplate what it meant to be a Christian ... they also remind you that you are a spiritual being, that you shouldn't just get caught up in academics and staying up late." Students did not distinctly express feeling challenged spiritually during their stay at High Sierra but rather felt the presence of an opportunity for growth which often brought them back for their second or third semester. Students acknowledged that their spiritual lives were integrated into every aspect of life at High Sierra.

Students who participated in the interviews expressed feeling both socially and personally challenged due to the small community typical of High Sierra. Nearly all the students cited that one of the biggest lessons they walked away with was the power of community. Many of the students referenced feeling frustrated or annoyed that they could not just escape when problems arose within the community. Interestingly, these students also stated that this was one of the benefits of community at High Sierra that even though life was difficult at times, it forced them to learn to be, in the words of Devon a senior at High Sierra, "reconciled to humanity." Students acknowledged that when you are spending twenty four hours a day, seven days a week for four months you see the best and worst in just about everyone. The biggest joy of community for many of the students interviewed, however, was having the ability to love people for who they really were and knowing that you were also loved.

Community, like spiritual growth, was a pervasive lesson and idea at High Sierra. Students cited Trek, classrooms, late night discussions, Bible studies and meals as a few of the many opportunities they had to get to know each other and love each other. It was difficult for students to discuss their experiences at High Sierra without talking about the relationships with fellow students, faculty and staff.

Finally, students felt free during their time at High Sierra to be themselves, to explore their identity free from judgment. Many of the students expressed feelings similar to Roger, a sophomore currently at High Sierra, who stated that he became more extroverted while at High Sierra. Roger claimed that this transition was due in part to “having people respect me for me; I could be myself and it probably boosted my confidence. I had an open door to grow.” The freedom to grow unbound by the perceived judgment and expectations of other people was central to the idea that students expressed of feeling free to be themselves. Other students articulated feeling safe to be “goofy,” “weird,” “funky,” and perhaps most importantly honest. It was through the ups and downs of community as a whole and through the ability to be comfortable in one’s own skin that students were challenged to grow individually and as a community.

The primary theme of challenge in the areas of academics, physical abilities, social skills and personal identity was an anthem emerging from the interviews conducted during this research. Additionally, the theme of fostering spiritual growth clearly came across. Challenge and growth were the overriding themes seen time and time again throughout the interviews.

#### Answer to the Research Question

Our research question, “How did the High Sierra program at Azusa Pacific University influence your life?” sought to discover the effect of the High Sierra program on students’ lives. Through an analysis of the themes, it became clear that students of this specific living-learning community were affected in many broad ways that can be filtered down from ten themes, to five areas of challenge. Out of these, three specific areas of development arose. First, students’ desire for, understanding of, and experience with a small community lead to more intimate interpersonal relationships. Secondly, as a result of these more intentional relationships,

students' made gains in establishing their own identities. Finally, through participation in the High Sierra program, students walked away with a renewed desire to learn and a new outlook on learning. The influence of these three areas on students' lives can best be understood through the lens of Chickering's Seven Vectors; specifically, the vectors of Developing Competence, Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships and Establishing Identity (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

As shown in the analysis of themes, many students expected to develop deeper relationships with people due to the small community. Almost every student reported that their experience with community was in line with their expectations. More so, from their experience they were challenged to wrestle with, and develop skill in, dealing with the interpersonal conflicts that inevitably arose. In traversing Chickering's vectors of Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence and Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, students are expected to recognize the importance of interdependence and to develop an appreciation for those whom are different from themselves while developing lasting and healthy relational bonds despite differences that arise (Evans, et al, 1998). Across the board, students reported that not only did they develop the ability to navigate interpersonal relationships in both good times and bad, but they also had developed a desire to see similar communities and relationships continue in their life outside of High Sierra.

As Chickering's model established, the ability to navigate one vector is built upon working through the preceding vectors (Evans, et al, 1998), and such is the case in the development of the High Sierra students in this study. Through the process of their development of interpersonal relationships, through navigating the conflicts and learning to accept and cherish those around them, students were allowed to more fully explore and establish their own identities

without fear of condemnation. As they found the freedom to be themselves, students were also challenged to look inward at who they were and what they believed and in so doing they moved along Chickering's Establishing Identity vector (Evans, et al, 1998). The extent to which each individual made gains in this area is unclear, yet the majority alluded to the idea that their interaction with High Sierra's community, classes and experiences caused them to formulate their own opinions and clarify their sense of self.

Perhaps one of the most exciting answers to the question of High Sierra's influence on students' lives was the impact it had on their view and practice of learning. Like the three-pronged fork of the Developing Competence vector, which allows students to confidently accept challenges and achieve goals, specifically in the areas of intellectual competence, physical competence and interpersonal competence (Evans, et al, 1998), there was an integrated nature to students' development, and the gains these students profess to have made is no different. Due to the integrated nature of the academics and the holistic approach to life that the program promoted, students recognized how each area of their life, especially their learning, was impacted by and influenced other areas of their life. Through the rigor of integrated academics, the physical challenge of Trek and navigating through interpersonal difference and community interaction, these students reshaped their idea of learning from that of a task to be completed into a way of living that would shape the rest of their lives.

While it would be unwise to attempt to quantify the extent to which students were influenced by their participation in the High Sierra program, it is not unfounded to see that there were positive gains for students developmentally, especially in the areas of identity, interpersonal relationships, and academic outlook.

### Suggestions for Practice

Though the research revealed few negative influences upon students that would necessitate immediate intervention in the High Sierra program, there are certainly areas that should receive attention in order to make the program better overall and to ensure continued positive gains for students. Due to the freedoms that the High Sierra program has to regulate and correct itself and the integration of many departments, many of the key factors that Chickering identified as being powerful influences on student development (Evans, et al, 1998) should regularly be given renewed attention by the faculty and staff. Additionally, though students failed to report on the quality of some of their gains, specifically in dealing with conflict and maintaining an integrated lifestyle, it may serve students even more if faculty and staff were intentional in offering specific tools for navigating these areas.

The seven areas which Chickering suggested had powerful influence on student development are already being addressed by the High Sierra program, though many of them are done so without much intentionality. Students in this study were quick to recognize, however unknowingly, the influence of many of these factors on their experience, some were more recognizably present than others. It would serve the program well to continue to ensure that programs and services are in line with both institutional and program objectives. Having clear objectives and making those known to the community will allow for more accountability between students, faculty and staff, along with allowing students greater ability to frame their experience within the context that High Sierra provides.

Student-faculty interaction, though already a reported strength of the High Sierra program, is easily an area that can fluctuate if it is not regularly evaluated and encouraged. Should faculty forget the importance of their interactions with students outside of the classroom

there is a likely possibility that the overall positive influence of the program on students' lives may be reduced. Along with co-curricular interaction, faculty's teaching style in the classroom can have a similar effect. The integrated nature of the High Sierra curriculum already lends itself to helping students develop their ability to think critically and integrate ideas across disciplines, but this, too, is done with intentionality that could easily be lost if faculty are not purposeful with each other and also in their styles of teaching.

The burden of student learning and development does not fall squarely upon the shoulders of the High Sierra faculty, though; it is a responsibility that must be shared by the student development professionals, as well. Collaboration between faculty and staff to create more seamless learning environments for student development is key; and if not carefully maintained, could quickly deteriorate, diminishing the positive gains for students.

Finally, though students reported feelings of growth in the areas of dealing with interpersonal conflict and a desire to maintain an integrated lifestyle, the extent and quality of said growth is unidentifiable. Knowing that students will be challenged in these areas, it is the advice of the researchers that specific attention is given to these areas. Namely, a workshop or program on conflict management where students are given concrete tools and ideas for how to approach interpersonal issues and a seminar or workshop on how students can successfully transition back onto the main campus and retain the components of life which they have come to enjoy while at High Sierra. By helping students to identify specific aspects of their experience that have profoundly impacted them, such as a holistic approach to learning that includes the integration of academics, community, physical aspects and spiritual disciplines, then addressing those issues, students will be better equipped to transfer their development into a different setting.

## Executive Summary

The influence of Azusa Pacific University's High Sierra program on the lives of student participants was studied through proctoring and coding twelve individual interviews with students who had chosen to participate in the program at least twice. By asking students to relate their experience with different aspects of the High Sierra program, researchers were able to identify common themes of evident influence. Aside from the general positive response to their experience, students related growth in many areas, but most particularly in interpersonal relationships, establishing their identity, and in their concept of learning. The growth reported coincided with seeing developmental gains along four of Chickering's Seven Vectors of student development.

Interpersonally, students admitted to desiring and finding deeper friendships as a result of living in such a small community. Admittedly, these friendships did not always come free of conflict, but the effort allowed for movement along Chickering's vectors of Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence and Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships. Through these interactions, and the holistic nature of the program, that challenged students to think critically about many areas of their lives, students moved along Chickering's Establishing Identity vector. Finally, students' perception of learning was transformed into a privilege, and participation in the act of learning was transformed to seek out a more integrated and holistic approach to their academic experience.

The implications of these findings is that the High Sierra program is having a positive influence on students' lives and that continued attention to that which makes the program successful should remain.

Reference

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S. & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.