
ALICE SLOAN EXPEDITION AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAM: EVALUATION REPORT

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Alice Sloan Trust and Associated Programs (Alice Sloan Expedition and Leadership Program)

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This document is in confidence.

Background

Outdoor education is a form of organised learning which takes place in an outdoor environment, and typically includes adventurous challenges and activities such as hiking, ropes courses, canoeing, climbing, and group games (Becker et al. 2017). Similarly, leadership programs are a form of organised learning which can comprise many forms including peer support and volunteer work (Ely et al. 2011).

Outdoor education and other leadership programs provide opportunities for people to develop positive relationships with the environment, other people, and themselves (Becker, et al. 2017). Positive impacts also include personal and social development, improved academic achievement, increased physical activity levels, leadership skill development, and enhanced mental health. These outcomes are crucial for wellbeing, society, and the natural environment.

Although there are a variety of established benefits associated with outdoor education and other leadership programs, recent research has turned to exploring benefits for specific groups, for example girls and women. Positive program outcomes are important as the United Nations has identified the need to empower girls and women as one of their sustainable development goals which includes a target of leadership participation and opportunity (United Nations 2020).



Alice Sloan Program

The Alice Sloan expedition was developed in response to the tragic death of Alice Sloan in 2005. Alice lost her life to a falling tree at sixteen years of age during an outdoor education trip. Alice had a love for the outdoors, sport and the arts which inspired the aim of the experience - to provide young women with similar opportunities, developing leadership and empowerment. The expedition was established by Alice's family and commenced in 2007 taking place in January each year. The expedition is funded by the Alice Sloan Trust, and partners with the Alexandra Secondary College (in regional Victoria), and the Outdoor Education Group (who also plan and deliver the program). Referred to as "Our Mountains, Our Journey", the program involves in-kind support for a ten-day expedition for Year 11 girls. The students participate in a range of challenging activities including camping, bushwalking, high ropes, rafting, canoeing, and cycling in the Alexandra-Eildon region of central Victoria. Participants are visited by Alice Sloan's parents, mid-camp, to share a lunch and celebrate their achievements. Following completion of the ten-day expedition, students are invited to optionally participate in the follow-on two-year youth leadership program, which includes a range of leadership activities over the final years of their secondary schooling (i.e. public speaking in reference to their expedition experience; interschool activities with other girls; fundraising for the Alice Sloan Trust; community program participation including mentoring younger girls; and attendance at a 3-day leadership program held in Melbourne titled 'yLead').



Current project

The Alice Sloan expedition and youth leadership program are designed to foster personal development, empowerment, and leadership skills. However, an in-depth understanding of the program characteristics contributing to these developments and the long-term impacts does not yet exist. Further, an understanding of any program challenges would enable the identification of potential improvement opportunities.

Evaluation aims

The evaluation aimed to:

- Explore participant experiences and outcomes of the Alice Sloan expedition and youth leadership program
- Understand if, and how, the program contributed towards developing empowerment and leadership
- Identify salient program components contributing to positive outcomes
- Evaluate program strengths and challenges from the perspective of past participants
- Identify potential opportunities for future research and program improvement

Method

Approach

Focus groups with past participants of the Alice Sloan Programs were used to gain a deep understanding of participant experiences and outcomes and explore program strengths and challenges.

Participants

Focus group participants were eligible to participate based on their involvement in the Alice Sloan ten-day expedition and two-year leadership program. Twelve women participated in two separate focus groups. Focus group one (i.e., four women) explored the expedition exclusively, while focus group two (i.e., eight women) explored both the expedition and the two-year leadership program. Participants were involved in an Alice Sloan experience between 2008 and 2015 and were aged between 22 and 30 years.

Procedure

Two focus groups were conducted by a Master of Applied Psychology student researcher, using an online meeting platform (Zoom). The researchers developed a focus group schedule to provide structure to, but not rigidly dictate the discussion. The Alice Sloan ten-day expedition and two-year leadership program were both designed to address empowerment and leadership, which were therefore central to focus groups explorations.

The focus group schedule explored:

- Experiences of the Alice Sloan ten-day expedition and two-year leadership program (where applicable)
- Empowerment
- Leadership
- Salient program components contributing to positive outcomes
- Program strengths, challenges, and ideas for improvement

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. Both focus groups were audio recorded. The recordings were individually transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed to identify themes, guided by Thematic Analysis.

Results

Program Outcomes

Focus group data found evidence that women felt a sense of empowerment and developed leadership from their participation in the Alice Sloan program. The ten-day expedition was the most frequently discussed component in relation to empowerment and leadership. In addition to empowerment and leadership, which are objectives of the expedition; a high sense of community was reported by participants.

Three main themes were identified within the dataset. Subthemes provide further conceptualisation of the specific mechanisms contributing to each theme. Furthermore, the interaction between themes appeared to enrich the experience. Each theme and subtheme will be explored in detail below, with the provision of exemplar quotes, and include:

- **Empowerment** in the form of *self-esteem, achievement and resilience*;
- **Leadership** in the form of *awareness of vulnerabilities, altered understanding of leadership, and leading self and others*; and
- **Sense of community** in the form of *unity and identity, barrier breakdown and friendships*.



Theme 1: Empowerment

Empowerment refers to a multi-dimensional social process which helps people gain control. It fosters power in people to act on their own authority in their own lives, their communities and in their society (Mandal 2013).

It was made evident by participants that the ten-day expedition engendered a sense of empowerment. Further, they felt it was well-timed for continued development and growth after camp completion. Participants also reported that the experience left them with a desire to empower others, which was linked to their later career choices.

“I think those middle years of high school are quite turbulent. There’s a lot of personal challenges and self-discovery, and I think it’s a really nice way to set up for those final years. It gives you a nice sense of stability to be able to tackle those more academic years of high school.”

“The outdoor ed part is the most memorable and it sort of kick starts it all and inspires you to really get out there and challenge yourself.”

“I always wanted to be a teacher, but I never saw myself being part of leadership roles. I have gone onto run the social representative council at my school and to know the students are getting empowered has become a huge passion of mine. It’s definitely changed the course of where I’m going with my teaching.”

Self-esteem

Participants reflected on the range of activities they completed whilst on the expedition (e.g., rafting, camping for ten consecutive days). Many reported that prior to the expedition, they felt that they were not capable of completing a number of these activities. They believe the knowledge of increased capability gained through accomplishing activities contributed to an enhanced sense of confidence and provided a foundation for further development. An additional factor reported to contribute to participants self-esteem was the gradual nature of exposure to the activities (i.e., the difficulty of tasks increased as the camp progressed).

“I felt a lot more capable within myself after the program then I did beforehand. I had low self-esteem beforehand and I came out of it feeling like I was a much better, more capable, competent person.”

Achievement

Participants described a sense of accomplishment upon completing various activities associated with their Alice Sloan experience. Some participants felt a real sense of achievement and even a ‘rush of adrenaline’ as they arrived at the final destination of the camp – a local park where family were waiting to congratulate them on their accomplishment, and a space where they could reflect on what they had completed in their previous ten-days.

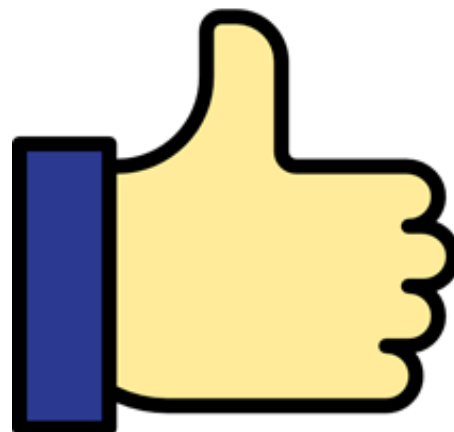
“I think it’s just such a well scaffolded program because each step of the way it’s a little challenge. Getting on the bus to do the first walk with your backpack that’s a challenge and you overcome it, then that night you set up your tent and cook your dinner and then you set a bigger goal like climbing the mountain and getting to the top.”

“I feel like I’ve definitely carried that for the last ten years, that feeling of success. I accomplished something that I found really challenging that I just needed to keep going at it, that was a bit of a lesson for me that I carried - if you just keep going with something challenging, you’ll experience success.”

Resilience

Participants described being physically and emotionally challenged in a safe and planned way during their expedition. Each program activity provided different challenges for participants depending on individual levels of confidence in attempting and completing them. Participants described enduring through many challenges on their camp expedition which made them stronger and more persistent.

'I think it gave me a lot of confidence at the time, and I think that confidence has helped me to be very persistent and persevere with a lot of challenges that have come up since then. It's also given a sense that I can land on my feet and work things out on the fly and that I would rather try something than not experience something. So, I think it's been really beneficial for creating that sort of mindset.'



Theme 2: Leadership

Leadership refers to a process of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a shared goal (Bolden 2004). This definition has expanded in recent times, to encompass not only an ability to motivate others, but to direct oneself, role model, and value others' strengths and skills (Antonakis & Day 2018). Researchers are recognising the interaction and interrelationship between leadership and empowerment (Fong & Snape 2015).

The Alice Sloan experience provided women with several varying opportunities to develop leadership skills (e.g., directing fellow participants with the map of the hikes, leading a water raft team, leading high-ropes communications). Skills learnt were then transferred into other leadership positions outside of the Alice Sloan experience.

“All the Alice girls were stepping up into leadership positions, it was quite a natural progression. I think rather than all the opportunities, it was us taking opportunities that we probably wouldn't have taken otherwise. I know in my year level there were six girls from Alice that were on the trip and all six girls had some form of leadership position outside of the Alice Trust.”

Awareness of vulnerabilities

Exposure to challenging program activities, uncovered individual participant strengths and vulnerabilities. This was reflected to contribute towards the ability to empathise with others on the expedition. Participants revealed that it was initially difficult to watch 'others struggle', before they learned how to best support them. Participants reflected on the most challenging days which resulted in the greatest awareness and support for others. They discussed how they worked out how to best support each other through communication (i.e., discussing what was upsetting them, and how they could best navigate highlighted issues moving forward).

“I was definitely able to gain leadership skills from all of us being in a more vulnerable position and seeing each other have bad days and being able to recognise when you need to help them or take some pressure off them in order to help everybody succeed. It allowed me to think more about emotions that other people were experiencing and my understanding that everyone comes from a different and sometimes quite complex background, so it allowed me to think what might be going on for them and then work accordingly.”

Altered understanding of leadership

Participants took part in a range of different activities which showcased alternative and additional skills that some participants had not previously associated with leadership. This resulted in participants expanding their understanding of the concept of leadership, what it could entail, and how they may already possess some of these skills. Definitions of leadership were transformed to holistically include previously unacknowledged elements such as leading by example or helping others to be leaders.

“I feel like it expanded my view of a leader. I was very narrow-minded. I thought they had to be that sort of confident person who know it all and are able to push people, but it’s like coming out of it it’s definitely more to the leadership role.”

Leading self and others

The varied leadership opportunities participants were given, such as navigating hikes and leading raft teams, enabled them to develop skills to lead in their own life (e.g., taking other leadership opportunities and making more informed decisions) and encourage leadership in others (e.g., encouraging other girls to go for various leadership positions such as school captain).

“It was really interesting in terms of that group dynamic of being a support person, being a leader, having to read the map and direct people or plan the way the day was going to flow, so it was a really interesting introduction into those sort of skills.”



Theme 3: Sense of community

A sense of community is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

Participants reported that many elements of their experience (e.g., changing tent partner each night, working together as a team to finish camp activities, and sharing such an impactful experience) created feelings of belonging and shared faith that each participant mattered in the completion of the expedition, which fostered a sense of community. These elements included sharing a common goal, intimate numbers, gender-specificity, and gentle exposure to vulnerabilities (e.g., increasing the difficulty of tasks as the camp progressed) fostering support and connection.

"I think the process wouldn't happen in a larger group, I think you would get subgroups and I think that would really erode the purpose of the trip. I think the camp really shifted the focus away from that coeducational schooling environment, so I think it also kind of made me realise how unempowered the other girls felt by that environment, and it was really nice to get outside of that for a period of time and build those skills in how to support other women and just have a more caring relationship with other women and girls."

Unity and identity

Participants reported a sense of belonging, unity, and identity by sharing such a recognised unique and impactful experience. Participants even referred to themselves as "Alice Girls" following their trip. This sense of identity was reflected on as important to participants as it served to formalise their experience and unite them as they completed their formative schooling years.



"It didn't matter what year you went through your Alice Sloan expedition, once you had gone through it you were always referred to as one of the Alice girls."

Barrier breakdown

The experience provided environmental conditions where participant's vulnerabilities were exposed, which seemingly broke down barriers. The required teamwork, and intimate numbers created ideal opportunity to break down barriers between participants (e.g., creating bonds with other participants that were not part of the same pre-existing social groups).

“A lot of people that went weren't necessarily my friends, they were just sort of people that I knew and had done classes with so it was really nice to get to know them and kind of become friends with them and lose the cliques of high school. I didn't feel like I was being judged by them and I certainly wasn't judging them, we kind of saw each other in really challenging situations.”

Friendships

Participants reflected on the establishment and development of bonds resulting from the camp experience. These bonds were reported to provide a sense of protection and support following the expedition during their formative years of schooling. Friendships were also reportedly created because the camp challenged participant assumptions of various school-based, pre-existing social circles.

“I remember coming out of the expedition and the girls that were in my trip, we weren't that close at school beforehand and then come the end of the expedition we were instant besties and it was like we had our own little circle outside of everything else that you know if we had an issue we knew that they were a safe space to go to like bounce ideas off of.”



Summary of findings

This evaluation explored the lived experiences of women who participated in the either ten-day Alice Sloan expedition alone, or with the subsequent two-year leadership program. The expedition and leadership program aimed to engage a small group of young women in a setting designed to build capacity in the form of empowerment and leadership. This exploration focused on the perceived developments and long-standing impacts of these programs. While the aims of the evaluation were to explore both the ten-day expedition and a two-year leadership program, the three main themes that emerged in the data were more commonly described because of the expedition experience. Participants described the following conditions as important to the sense of increased empowerment and leadership:

- Smaller group numbers
- Gender specific (female only)
- Inclusion of capacity building activities
- Timing (age/developmental stage of participation)
- Outdoor education component

While the identified themes were consistent with the objectives of the Alice Sloan expedition and leadership program - to develop empowerment and leadership in young women - a sense of community also emerged as a major theme from the focus groups. These major themes (empowerment, leadership, and a sense of community) all significantly contributed to the perceived personal outcomes from participation including increased: self-esteem, resilience, awareness, empathy, and sense of unity and identity. The significance of the personal outcomes identified appeared to be strengthened by an interaction between themes. For example, women reflected on the sense of community giving them an increased confidence to lead, which was empowering. The findings suggest:

- If conditions are appropriate, programs as short as ten days can provide a foundational sense of empowerment and leadership that can translate into perceived long-lasting benefits in participants' lives
- Participants were more likely to reflect on the outcomes from the camp experience, which may indicate this was perceived as more influential than the two-year leadership program. This may indicate that the camp alone was adequate in meeting the desired outcomes and objectives, whereas the leadership program may not be
- The interaction between each theme amplifies the benefits seen in each, for example participants reported that the sense of community within the expedition left them more confident to lead activities and ultimately more empowered

- While there are many international examples of micro-level initiatives that aim to empower women (Bordat et al., 2011), efforts should also encompass leadership development. Participants identified this concept as playing a pivotal role in their perceived ability to empower other women following their program experience and was also related to career-based choices (e.g., becoming a teacher)
- Overall, the experiences of the participants indicated that the program met its theory driven objectives of empowerment and leadership development, with the additional major theme of developing a sense of community further reinforcing the perceived benefits of the program.

Future Directions and Recommendations

The findings from exploring the experiences of past participants in the Alice Sloan expedition and youth leadership program has increased the understanding of the potential long-term benefits of the programs. These benefits include perceptions of increased empowerment and leadership abilities, and a sense of community. Additional information shared within the focus groups provide directions and recommendations for future programs. A summary of these is provided below:

- Participants suggested that an expedition size of 8 to 10 people was most likely to lead to achieving the program's objectives. Those who reported going on expeditions with lesser numbers (6), felt they did not share the same benefits as others who experienced higher numbers (8-10 fosters: greater connections; avoids subgroups appearing; allows for broader opportunities for involvement in different leadership activities). **Recommend aiming for 8 to 10 participants each year in future programs.**
- Participants reported a loss of connection with the program after leaving school. Although the biannual luncheon was mentioned as an opportunity to connect, many participants stated that the cost of attending this function was prohibitive, and a suggestion of a picnic was offered. **Consider alternative formal or informal ways of connecting former participants.**
- Participants suggested finding a way to formalise their achievement in the expedition experience, for example, in the style of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards. **Consider an official award to recognise program achievements.**
- Future programs should continue to be scheduled in January each year before participants begin their Year 11 studies, as this was reported to set a foundational

support network at school. **Recommend that programs are scheduled prior to commencement of Year 11.**

- Participants reported their perceived empowerment instilled a confidence and desire to then empower others, as shown by the career choices of several participants, which included outdoor education leadership, teaching and early childhood education. Participants reflected this occurred because of their Alice Sloan experience. **Recommend that empowerment remains an objective of the program.**
- Participants reported the expedition activities (camping, hiking, rafting, etc) to be physically and emotionally challenging, creating a sense of perceived resilience. **Recommend that expedition activities be maintained within the program.**
- Several participants reported that changing tent buddies each night during the expedition helped to foster friendships and break down barriers. **Recommend retaining the rotation of tent/sleeping allocations.**
- Participants reported that opportunity to engage in a variety of leadership activities, such as navigating hikes and mentoring others, helped to foster perceived leadership among participants. **Recommend retaining a range of leadership activities.**
- Although not explicitly stated as a program objective (Alice Sloan Trust 2020), a sense of community emerged as a major theme among participants. **Consider including a sense of community as an additional objective of the expedition.**
- Several participants reported that their expedition experience led to greater perceived outcomes because of the female exclusive environment. Activities that challenged gender norms were also perceived as fostering a sense of empowerment. **Recommend that future expeditions remain female-specific experiences and include physically challenging activities.**
- Particular activities within the expedition and leadership programs were reported to have a positive influence. These included: the interschool activity with Toorak (perceived as broadening horizons and suggested for this time to be expanded), yLead, and GirlLink; meeting Jennie and John for lunch at the mid-way point of their trip as a 'special day' and 'bringing the trip together'; and the perceived importance of the selection for the leadership program, that is, the application and interview process. **Recommend these elements and processes are maintained in future programs where possible.**

- Participants appreciated the reflective process throughout the program which they felt helped them acknowledge their achievements along the way. **Recommend that reflective processes remain part of the program and consider formalising through use of diaries/blogs, etc.**
- Participants reported perceived benefits from having teachers from their school take part in their expedition, including feeling of a stronger connection with that teacher, and increasing the access for support during their formal schooling years. **Recommend that teachers attend the expedition when possible.**

Conclusion

This evaluation aimed to broadly explore the participant experiences and outcomes of the Alice Sloan expedition and youth leadership program. Specifically, evaluating if, and how, the program contributed towards developing empowerment and leadership. In addition, this exploration sought to identify salient program components contributing to positive outcomes, program strengths and challenges, and potential opportunities for improvement. Findings indicate that camp participation led to perceptions of enhanced empowerment and leadership, and a sense of community, which all contributed positively to personal outcomes. Continuing to deliver such programs, and perhaps extending their reach, could provide a platform to empower and develop leadership in young women towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality and empowering all women and girls by increasing leadership opportunities and participation.

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