

# OUTDOOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

by the numbers

Brent Bell, Ph.D.  
University of New Hampshire

Kellie Gerbers, Ph.D.  
Westminster University

Jeff Turner, Ph.D.  
Georgia College

Jeremy Jostad, Ph.D.  
Eastern Washington University

## Is the sky falling?

## What is happening to OAPs across the country?"

### KEY FINDINGS

#### 1. Changing number of OAPs

- The number of OAPs identified in 2021 was 33% greater than in 2016.
- Roughly half is attributed to new programs and half to operationalization of census.
- Our findings suggest a decrease of 14% between 2021 and 2023.

#### 2. Enrollment in OAPs

- For all institutional types and sizes, enrollments are more likely to maintain or decrease 2023 compared to 2016.
- Very small and large HEIs are most likely maintaining (50% each) and small and medium HEIs are most likely decreasing (53% and 43%, respectively).

#### 3. Implications

- Given the increase in OAPs between 2016–2021, the decrease between 2021–2023 may be more directly attributed to COVID and less to broader economics of the outdoor industry and higher education.
- Changes in the number of OAPs may be hiding even greater "volatility."

Table 3

Enrollment Trends of Outdoor Academic Programs in U.S. Higher Education

Enrollment Trend	Increasing		Maintaining		Decreasing	
	2017	2023	2017	2023	2017	2023
All OAPs	42%	24%	29%	40%	29%	36%
Institutional Type						
Private	32%	21%	21%	43%	42%	36%
Public	45%	26%	30%	39%	20%	35%
Institutional Size						
Very Small	30%	25%	40%	50%	30%	25%
Small	31%	18%	15%	29%	54%	53%
Medium	61%	27%	22%	30%	11%	43%
Large	33%	27%	33%	50%	22%	23%

Note: Missing survey data from 2023 was imputed from IPEDS with Increasing Enrollment represented by a 20%+ increase in enrollment over the previous five years and Decreasing Enrollment represented by a 20%+ decrease.

#### References:

- Bell, B.J., Turner, J., Andre, E., Gerbers, K., Jostad, J., Hobbs, W. & Collins, K. (2023). A census methodology for outdoor adventure research. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 15, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2023-11560>
- Bell, B.J., Seaman, J., & Trautvien, N. (2017). Outdoor education academic programs in the United States. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Leadership*, 9, 251–253. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2017-V9-I2-8264>
- Harvey, B. C. (2021). Teetering on the demographic cliff, Part 1: Prepare now for the challenging times ahead. *Planning for Higher Education*, 49(4), 1–12.
- Knox, L. (2023, June 23). Shrinking pains at West Virginia University. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2023/06/23/distraught-west-virginia-u-faculty-push-back>
- Turner, J., Jostad, J., Bell, B.J., Gerbers, K., Hobbs, W. Andre, E., & Collins, K. (2022). Overview of the current landscape of outdoor academic programs in higher education. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 14, 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2022-11595>