



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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The Viking Expedition: A Summer Program for Current and Future At-risk Students

Introduction: The Need for Truffulas

Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care. Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back. (The Lorax, by Dr. Seuss)

At the St. Augustine Campus of St. Johns River Community College, we spent our summer planting Truffulas so our "friends," current at-risk college students and potential ones, will indeed come back. Our Truffula was The Viking Expedition, a free program designed for children ages 8 through 12. The name was derived from our mascot, the Viking, and from the five-week educational expedition the program offered. The Viking Expedition was designed to teach leadership, provide access to computers and the Internet, promote an understanding of the arts, and reduce fear about science. Though many community colleges hold such summer camps, ours was unique in that the leaders of this Expedition were at-risk college students. By giving these students an opportunity to showcase their talents to children who are growing up in situations that may mirror their own, the Viking Expedition helped these students become more confident in themselves and more focused on their own college experience.

The Participants: Friends of the Lorax

Our friends, the participants in this program, targeted two main groups: children from the local community and our students from at-risk backgrounds. Most of the campers in the Viking Expedition were minority children from low-income households. The college partnered with two local youth agencies, the St. Augustine YMCA and the Willie Galimore Center, to select those children who could benefit most. Permission slips were sent home with the children, and the interest displayed by parents was overwhelming. The children were excited about the opportunity to attend college, and parents welcomed the idea of educational summer activities.

The camp counselors were current at-risk college students who were selected based on their potential leadership abilities as demonstrated in various campus activities. Potential counselors were interviewed one-on-one to determine their interest in the program and their willingness to participate as a volunteer. Again, the response was overwhelming as these college students were more than willing to help children from situations and backgrounds similar to their own. This provided an opportunity for these college students to prove that despite home circumstances, the community college provided an avenue to achievement, both academically and socially. Two counselor training workshops prepared our students for the challenge ahead and ensured that each felt comfortable with his or her leadership role. To complement the expedition theme, each counselor wore khaki shorts and hiking boots, and a polo shirt with the Viking Expedition logo, perfect attire for planting a Truffula.

The Program: Our Truffula

The Viking Expedition was offered over five consecutive Fridays. There was no magic to this schedule other than the college was on a four-day summer schedule, and classrooms and computer labs were vacant on Fridays. The participants arrived on campus at 9:45 a.m. courtesy of the YMCA bus and were divided into groups of 20, each group led by a male and female counselor. Each day began with a large general session consisting of icebreaker activities and discussion of the day's activities. Participants were given color-coded nametags that identified their group for the day.

The individual groups then rotated through three one-hour workshops—leadership, computer, and science or art, depending on the day—with a break for lunch. The leadership workshops were designed around Dr. Seuss movies and books and focused on self-esteem, motivation, conflict resolution, acceptance of others, and goal setting. These workshops were led by our student activities director and were interactive to allow maximum participation from the children.



The computer workshops were led by campus volunteers, including our public services librarian and our computer lab student worker. The workshops began with an introduction about how a computer works and the basics of navigating the Internet. Since most of these children have not had access to computers or the Internet, these workshops were a special challenge and required considerable help from the counselors. The workshops concluded with each student designing his or her own home page. We found that many children had difficulty reading, which made navigation of the Web almost impossible. Next year, an attempt will be made to determine the reading level of the children and to group them accordingly. Many of our counselors were so concerned about the reading problems that they volunteered as tutors throughout the school year.

The third workshop was considered a wild-card and changed from day-to-day. One day the workshop focused on the sciences. A local science instructor volunteered his time to do experiments such as those on the "Mr. Wizard" television program. Another day the high school drama team volunteered to teach the participants about acting. Each group of children read from one act of *Snow White*. At the conclusion of the day, the three acts were performed together so the students could see the play unfold. On the remaining days, this workshop consisted of an art project in which the students designed stepping stones from cement stones and ceramic tiles donated by local businesses. Two community members volunteered to help the children with this project. The stones were placed on the campus so the children could come back and see their works of art in the years to come. A picture of each child with his or her stone was provided, so the participants could show their handiwork to family and friends.

Each day, lunch was donated by a local business. This free lunch was an important part of the day, as it provided a time for all groups to convene. If individuals were not grouped with friends, they could still sit together during lunch. Our counselors and workshop leaders also were treated to lunch and mingled with the children in a relaxed atmosphere. Our goal was to ensure that having lunch money or bringing a lunch was not a concern for any child.

A closing session each day provided a time for wrap-up and motivation. Children were given stickers throughout the day for "good deeds," and the closing session always included a time for showing these to friends. Friendly competition between groups was encouraged as a way to promote team and leader loyalty.

The cost of the program to the college was approximately \$25 per child, much of which was underwritten

by business and community members. The positive impact on the lives of these children and the college students that led them is invaluable, based on feedback from children, counselors, and parents. All of our student leaders felt they had gained leadership experience—as a result, some have even chosen careers in education. Based on evaluations given by the children at the end of each day, many now feel that a college education is attainable, and many were very proud to have been a part of the college, if only for a summer. The college gained invaluable connections with local youth organizations, and a front-page article in the local paper helped spread the word of our endeavor to fulfill our middle name—"community." The Viking Expedition proves that helping the growing number of at-risk students is not an insurmountable obstacle, but an achievable dream. St. Johns River Community College will be reaping the fruit of this Truffula forest as the friends of the Lorax return now and in the coming years.

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not. (The Lorax, by Dr. Seuss)

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