

## Regular Paper

# The Effect of an Outdoor Recreation Program on Individuals With Disabilities and their Family Members

## *A Case Study*

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**Abstract:** Efforts to understand physical activity and its potential effect on psychosocial well-being have been extensive (Blick et al., 2015; Folkins, 1976). Physical activity has been shown to improve psychological wellness, and benefits are enhanced when activities are performed outdoors (Boden & Hartig, 2003). *Common Ground* was established to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities through outdoor recreation. Informed by general and family systems theory, the present qualitative case study was designed to develop an in-depth understanding of *Common Ground*, an outdoor recreation program for individuals with disabilities. Results of three semi-structured focus groups offer a breadth of perspectives on the effect of *Common Ground* on program participants and their family members, and how outdoor recreation opportunities help reduce stereotypes, while empowering participants to realize their full potential. This work has the potential to inform therapeutic recreation research and enhance the provision of recreation services to individuals with disabilities.

**Keywords:** *Physical activity, outdoor recreation, family systems theory*

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Efforts to understand recreation and its potential effect on psychosocial well-being have been extensive (e.g., Blick, Saad, Goreczny, Roman, & Sorensen, 2015; Bodin & Hartig, 2003; Folkins, 1976). Physical activity and recreation have long been shown to improve psychosocial wellness among participants (Blick et al., 2015; Folkins, 1976), and these benefits are amplified when the activity is performed outdoors (Bodin & Hartig, 2003). Outdoor recreation has been linked to a variety of developmental and psychosocial benefits, including increased social skills, enhanced self-concept, improved social adjustment, self-confidence, tolerance of others, increased sense of well-being, and increased group involvement (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligmann, 1997; McAvoy, 2001; McAvoy, Smith, & Rynders, 2006). Additionally, it can provide opportunities for feelings of empowerment and control in individuals with disabilities (Hough & Paisley, 2008), and benefits such as cohesion at the family level (West & Merriam, 2009).

Disabilities, either physical or mental, present barriers to individuals with disabilities (Chadwick, Cuddy, Kusel, & Taylor, 2005; Kinavey, 2007) and their families (Schuntermann, 2009). Individuals with disabilities benefit from physically active lifestyles, but many require adaptations for successful inclusion. Some of the barriers that these individuals face as they strive to engage in physical activities relate to the environment and accessibility, cost, equipment, emotional/psychological support, resource availability, and prevailing perceptions/attitudes (Rimmer, 2005; Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004). Other barriers include the school environment, family relationships (especially with parents), individual attitudes, the

need for tangible supports and transportation, and a lack of knowledge (Bodde & Seo, 2009; Rimmer & Rowland, 2008). Efforts have been made and are underway to make physical activity and recreational programming accessible to individuals with disabilities (e.g., Bishop & Driver, 2007; Richards, Wilson, & Eubank, 2012).

Despite evidence from this emerging literature, the efficacy of outdoor recreation programs to provide benefits for individuals with disabilities has not received the same attention as programs for individuals without disabilities (Richards, Wilson, & Leverenz, 2013). Because outdoor recreation has the potential to foster individual wellness and family cohesiveness in individuals with disabilities, examining the effect of these programs is an important research direction. Understanding the benefits of outdoor recreation for individuals with disabilities requires attention to how recreation programs provide benefits to individuals and their family members. To address these gaps in the literature, it is important to illuminate the experiences of individuals with disabilities who are involved in outdoor recreation. Moreover, to assess the effect of these opportunities on families, it is important to highlight the experiences of family members. Finally, to highlight the purpose of the outdoor recreation program, it is important to consider the perspectives of program staff that work with the participants and family members.

Adopting a broad systems theory lens is useful in addressing interactions among individuals (Bertalanffy, 1968; Merton, 1938; Parsons, 1951). The primary tenet of systems theories is that groups and organizations are affected by interactions between and among individuals and subsystems. In its broadest sense, a system is defined as a unit that can be

distinguished from its environment and that both affects and is affected by that environment (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Feedback from the environment provides the system with a measurement of deviation from the system's goals. The system's homeostasis, or the congruency between the system's goals and actions, is dynamically maintained through a series of feedback and control episodes (Parsons, 1951). The systems perspective maintains that understanding the individual is only possible by viewing the whole. In the present study, this framework is useful in attempting to understand how participants, family members, and program staff in an outdoor recreation context may interact to achieve certain outcomes at the individual and family level.

A specific formulation of this broad theory is the family systems approach, which suggests that the family system plays a key role in how individual members engage in the pursuit of goals. Because family goals are organized into hierarchies (Becvar & Becvar, 2009), when families with members who have disabilities engage in recreation, the family is affected in terms of support, encouragement, and engagement (Kitzman-Ulrich et al., 2010). Families with tangible (e.g., financial stability) and intangible (e.g., family unity and cohesion) resources to draw upon are better able to engage in social and recreational activities outside of the home, as well as express their emotions and provide support to other members of the family system.

The Core and Balance Framework proposes that increased involvement in family recreation activities positively relates to family strength concepts such as family functioning, communication, and satisfaction with family life and leisure time (Townsend & Zabriskie, 2010; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). In light of

this framework, organizations that serve individuals with disabilities are beginning to recognize the importance of outdoor recreation as well as the value of teaching skills and providing services to support families. One way to support families is through programs providing socialization opportunities not only for the individual participant, but for the family as well (Gan, Campbell, Gemeinhardt, & McFadden, 2006; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1991). As families engage in recreation together, they are able to establish a sense of "normalcy" and grow closer through mutual support during physical interaction (Castañeda & Sherrill, 1999). Community programs and nonprofit organizations play an important role in assisting families during recreation opportunities by promoting participation that includes individuals with disabilities within their family system (King, Curran, & McPherson, 2012).

Because this study was designed to analyze the effect of an outdoor recreation program on individuals and family members (see Burns, Fenton, Javalkar, Cohen, Haberman, & Ferris, 2014), it is useful to view these key stakeholders within a systems framework of subsystems and systems. Adopting this approach draws attention to the connection between the perceived benefits an individual may experience, the benefits perceived by other individual family members, and the overall strength of the family unit. Guided by a systems framework, the purpose of the present qualitative case study was to develop an in-depth understanding of *Common Ground*, an outdoor recreation program for individuals with disabilities. Specifically this study addresses three questions: (1) What are the effects of participation in *Common Ground* on individuals with a disability?, (2) How does participation in *Common Ground* affect

participants' family members?, and (3) How are staff who administer the programming influenced by their involvement in *Common Ground*?

## Method

### Research Setting

*Common Ground* is an organization in the American Mountain West that is focused on providing inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities. Participants in *Common Ground* regularly engage in recreational activities such as downhill skiing, kayaking, canoeing, snowshoeing, hiking, rock climbing, and camping. The organization provides adapted equipment and support, which enables individuals with disabilities to participate in outdoor recreation alongside their peers. In addition to paid staff, *Common Ground* draws upon volunteers, several of whom are recruited from a local university, to assist with programming. The primary aim of *Common Ground* is to provide opportunities that reduce stereotypes, raise awareness, and empower individuals with disabilities to realize their full potential. Participants are encouraged to invite their friends and family members without disabilities to become involved in program activities alongside them. Individuals are invited to attend as many or as few program activities as they desire, and the program serves over 2,400 individuals with disabilities annually.

### Participants

Subsequent to approval by an institutional review board, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. This strategy was employed in an effort to sample participants who could provide varied and detailed insights into the ways *Common Ground* affects participants and family members while main-

taining a manageable sample size for in-depth qualitative analysis (Bruce, 2007). Participants, their family members, and program staff at *Common Ground* were recruited for participation to triangulate our understanding of the effect of *Common Ground* by gaining insights from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Patton, 2015).

Seventeen individuals (10 males and 7 females) agreed to participate. Five *Common Ground* participants (three males, two females), aged 24–35 ( $M = 30.0$ ) years consented. They reported having been diagnosed with the following congenital or acquired disabilities: spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, autism spectrum disorder, and scleroderma (i.e., the hardening of connective tissue). Participants reported having been involved with *Common Ground* between six months and 10 years ( $M = 6.1$  years). Four family members related to these participants (two mothers, one father, and one wife), aged 23–68 ( $M = 51.8$ ) years, also took part in the research. Finally, eight program staff (six males and two females), aged 23–64 ( $M = 34.3$ ) years, participated, and reported having worked at *Common Ground* between two months and eight years ( $M = 3.1$  years). The primary roles of these individuals ranged from fundraising and staff oversight, to event coordination and daily activity planning.

### Research Design and Data Sources

The present study was designed using a case study methodology to evaluate *Common Ground*. This approach was selected because case studies allow researchers to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 1988, xii). In employing descriptive case study methods (Yin, 2003), we were able to ex-

plore and describe the experiences of the participants, staff, and parents, as well as the meaning they assigned to and derived from their involvement (Stake, 2008). It should be noted that, as a research group, we have both insider and outsider understanding of the *Common Ground* program. One author was an insider; she had volunteered at *Common Ground* and built rapport with participants and staff. While this insider understanding can help researchers gain access to the inner workings of an organization (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), being too close to the participants and setting can also introduce biases. We were, therefore, intentional about balancing this insider perspective with the outsider perspectives of the other authors throughout the collection and analysis of data.

Data were collected in focus group settings to document the nature and breadth of stakeholder experiences. Focus groups were chosen to allow participants to stimulate, build upon, and query one another's ideas through discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Separate focus groups were conducted with groups of participants, family members, and program staff. All focus groups were guided by semi-structured interview guides (Patton, 2015) that began with the questions, "What has *Common Ground* meant to you as individuals?," "What has *Common Ground* meant to your families?," and "What has *Common Ground* meant to you as a staff member or volunteer?"

Following this opening discussion, a set of main questions was used to discern individuals' perceptions of how *Common Ground* affected participants and family members (e.g., "Has your participation in *Common Ground* influenced any of your family relationships?"). This portion of the discussion lasted about 60 minutes for the participants and family members,

and about 80 minutes for the program staff. Throughout the focus group discussions, probes were used to further assess the effect of *Common Ground*. This semi-structured format allowed participants to build upon one another's thoughts and opinions by directly questioning one another, sharing personal anecdotes, or explicitly agreeing or disagreeing with points (Patton, 2015). Following each focus group, the moderator performed a conversation summary (i.e., a brief synopsis of the main points offered by study participants). This strategy has been outlined by Krueger (1998) as providing participants an opportunity to extend and/or clarify their previous responses while together as a group. In many cases, individuals recalled personal anecdotes or opinions and amended or adjusted previous remarks, thereby enhancing both the detail and the trustworthiness of the data.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, two researchers analyzed data using a combination of inductive analysis and the constant comparative method (Patton, 2015). The analysis process began with each researcher independently using open and axial coding methods. Open coding (i.e., the process of identifying themes in the data; Corbin, & Strauss, 2008) was implemented to inductively identify key themes in each focus group transcript. Axial coding followed open coding as the researchers developed the emergent themes into coherent coding categories. The coding categories were then developed into a codebook (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once each researcher had constructed a codebook, they used these codebooks to separately code all of the data from the focus group interviews. This process embraced the constant comparative method

as changes were made to the codebook in order to accommodate data that challenged or extended each category (Patton, 2015). After the data had been coded, the researchers individually reviewed their own codebooks and structured the coding categories into first- and second-order themes in order to communicate the participants' perspectives on experiences in the *Common Ground* program. At this point, the researchers compared thematic structures. It was found that there were many similarities between the two independent structures and, following some discussion and negotiation, the researchers came to consensus agreement on a final set of themes and subthemes that informed the results of this study.

In the present study, trustworthiness was addressed through data triangulation, researcher triangulation, and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Data triangulation involved interviewing different stakeholders (i.e., participants, family members, and program staff) about the same phenomenon and comparing and integrating their perspectives. Researcher triangulation involved having different analysts code the data across the two phases of analysis, and then comparing the resultant coding structures to arrive at a final interpretation and representation. Finally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process by cataloging the progress made by researchers as the data were analyzed. This helped to promote transparency and allow for communication among researchers.

## Results

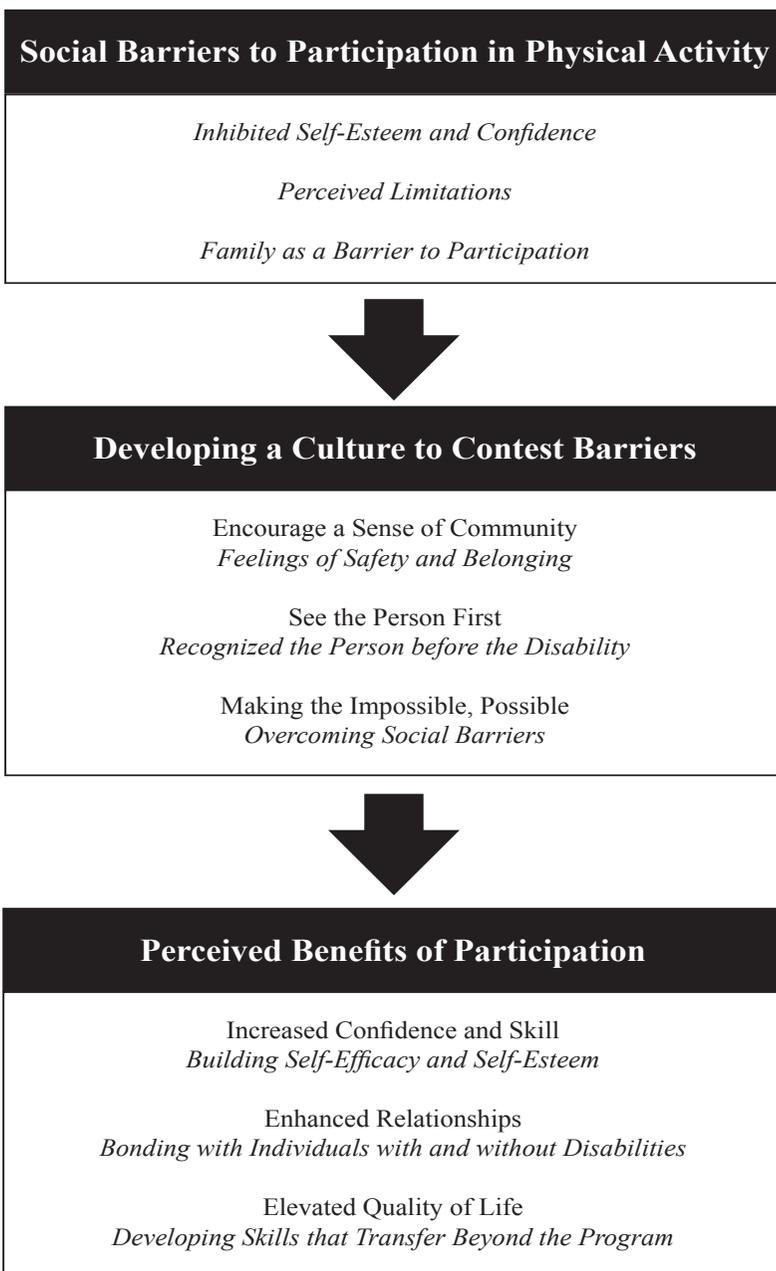
The results of this study indicate that participants, family members, and staff of the *Common Ground* program generally enjoyed their interactions and found their involvement to be a positive fix-

ture in their lives. Themes derived from qualitative data analysis indicated that 1) participants perceived some social barriers to participating in physical activity; 2) however, through the enactment of its mission, *Common Ground* provided a way for individuals with disabilities to overcome those barriers; and 3) participants perceived intra- and interpersonal benefits to program participation. These themes and associated subthemes are presented in the following sections, and are depicted graphically in Figure 1. As themes are introduced, we include quotations from the dataset. Pseudonyms are used for participants, and the role of the speaker is acknowledged.

### Social Barriers to Participation in Physical Activity

For a variety of reasons, individuals with disabilities often experience “invisible barriers” to successful integration into society in a way that allows them to participate in the same activities as their peers without disabilities (Wong, Chan, DaSilva-Cardoso, Lam, & Miller, 2004). Participants, family members, and program staff recognized that there were some barriers that limited individuals with disabilities access to and involvement in physical activity programs.

Program participants, such as Emily, expressed insecurities related to their disability, which inhibited their comfort with becoming active. She explained that, because of her disability, “I struggle with depression, and for years before that I just existed, really. I didn't go anywhere I didn't do anything my family couldn't help me because I didn't want the help.” She indicated that becoming involved with able-bodied peers was “devastating,” and mentioned that “having to sit at the bottom of the hill just to wait for them to come back it was actually rather upsetting. It got to my self-esteem.” Eddie



**Figure 1.** Themes (standard font) and subthemes (italics) related to participant, family member, and program staff perceptions of Common Ground.

(participant) agreed and noted that frustrations related to trying to be active with his peers, saying, “They forget [I am in a wheelchair] and will get these crazy ideas to walk up the side of the mountains and I can’t do that.”

*Common Ground* participants and staff members also spoke about how having a disability created a hopeless mentality or destructive temperament, and how this limited their motivation to seek out physical activity opportunities. As Jeff (participant) shared, “Those who have disabilities might think because they are disabled they can’t go out and do the things that others can do.” This sentiment was echoed by Melanie (family member), who stated, “[My husband] was getting to a point where he was really starting to lose confidence in his ability, I suppose as a man, and being a provider for our home.” Eliza (program staff) noted that perceived barriers to activity created “fears and anxiety” that prevent some from becoming active. Finally, program staff recognized that participants’ disabilities might limit their family’s idea of what they are able to accomplish. Linda (staff member) recalled a young girl who was visually impaired and whose “family would go on ski trips and if she got to go she would go and hang out in the lodge... while they all went skiing...because they didn’t think she could do it.” Eliza (program staff) emphasized that

It’s important to note that the barriers aren’t just coming up from the participants; largely it’s from their family. I think sometimes the barrier is the family. Some participants never try an activity because their families don’t believe they can do it... there are a lot of misconceptions related to what is not possible for someone with a disability.

## Developing a Culture to Contest Barriers

Understanding that there were some barriers that prevented individuals with disabilities from participating in regular physical activity, *Common Ground* sought to create a climate in which participants felt welcome and safe, and that sets the stage for growth and development. Importantly, *Common Ground* empowered individuals to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and realize their full potential. Subcategories that arose from the analysis of *Common Ground*’s culture and philosophy included (a) encourage a sense of community, (b) see the person first, and (c) making the impossible, possible.

**Encourage a sense of community.** Integral to the way in which *Common Ground* approached working with individuals with disabilities was creating a sense of community among all involved in the program. This required the creation of an emotionally safe environment in which individuals could interact with one another and build positive relationships. The positive nature of the *Common Ground* community led parents to view it as “a safe place” (Natalie) that gave their children “a sense of belonging” (Mary Beth). Jeff (participant) talked about how *Common Ground* was “another opportunity to make new friends who share the same interests as you.” Others viewed *Common Ground* as an opportunity to interact with people who had a wide variety of abilities. Rick (staff member) discussed how a participant with disabilities was able to form a relationship with his son, who did not have disabilities, on a rafting trip: “It was kind of cool because he was a 9-year-old child ... it was cool to see him bond with my 9-year-old son and seeing them have a great time on the river and experience things.”

Essential to building the type of community that participants and family members discussed was the enjoyment and enthusiasm for the program that was shared by everyone involved. Eliza (program staff) explained, “to me, one of the biggest things that impacts these people is joy and fun ... that’s one of the biggest things we’re giving them.” Larry (participant) said his parents initially forced him to participate in a *Common Ground* event, but “it was so incredibly much fun that I continued to come ... that’s why I call it the ‘bomb-dot-com-mon-ground’ because they are an explosion of fun for everyone! Totally awesome!” For Sam (program staff), the fun he had kept him coming back to volunteer. He recalled a particular event for which he was transporting participants and had to pick them up at 4:00 a.m.: “The garage opens up and Larry comes bursting out in his wheelchair and he is just yipping and yal-lering.” He continued, “the excitement he had and the gratitude he showed me that morning just really hit me ... how much [the program] really does mean.”

**See the person first.** There has been a widespread movement in the culture that surrounds individuals with disabilities and those who work with them to view the person first (Bickford, 2004). By recognizing the person first, the hope is that society views individuals with disabilities for who they are rather than for their disability. The person-first philosophy was clearly articulated among participants, family members, and program staff in discussing the culture of *Common Ground*. Cecil (program staff) emphasized the importance of “looking past disabilities.” He noted that this was “something that we say in our [staff] orientations, but it really rings true when you get involved [with the program].” Another staff member provided some

elaboration: “there is a distinct mindset in this office...It doesn’t matter who it is, everyone is on the same level. It’s part of the mission [and]...part of the way people have been trained” (Sam, program staff).

Jimmy (participant and program staff) discussed the importance of the person-first philosophy and how it felt when people stopped treating him as if he were “disabled.” He explained, “when people with ability forget that we have disabilities it’s because they stop seeing it ... it’s because they really grow to love and respect us for who we are.” Natalie (family member) provided a parent’s perspective on *Common Ground*’s mission related to inclusivity and seeing the person first. She explained that there are so many participants “who go on different trips and nobody looks at them like they’ve got disabilities ... you don’t see any difference, and that helps.” Rick (program staff) explained how the program “changed my attitude about people with disabilities. When I first came I was kind of nervous and treated everyone with kid gloves [because] I didn’t want to offend them ... [but] now I don’t treat them any different [than individuals who do not have disabilities].”

**Making the impossible, possible.** At an organizational level, *Common Ground* sought to develop community and focus on individuals first. This was evident in each focus group, as interviewees described *Common Ground* as helping to develop an inclusive culture through which activities became possible. A large part of this involved adapting activities to meet the individual needs of participants. Emily (participant) had spina bifida, which made some physical activities difficult. She explained how *Common Ground* staff implemented adaptations that allowed her to enjoy “one of my favorite things, cycling ... they have the

kind of bike that is like a wheelchair with a front on it that extends ... toward you with the hand crank so that you can hand crank it.” Lenny (participant) explained how “every time I come to *Common Ground* it’s so amazing and I feel so free ... there are ways for everyone to do most anything, but without *Common Ground* it’s impossible. With *Common Ground* ... I felt like I could do it.” Natalie (family member) discussed how the program allowed her daughter, Kathleen, who experienced cognitive and physical delays, to become more active. After serendipitously stumbling upon *Common Ground* “we started coming here right away and she’s been to every park in the state. She loves downhill skiing, dog sledding, and camping. I never thought she would go camping. She goes camping all the time! (laughs).” Rick (program staff) confirmed the way in which individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to do things they may not have a chance to do without *Common Ground*: “We can’t get all of them to climb a mountain to the top and let them see the sunrise, but we will get them as close as we can and give them those experiences.”

Second, *Common Ground* directly challenged social misconceptions related to individuals with disabilities participating in physical activity. For Eliza (program staff) a huge part of the program mission was “breaking down barriers and helping people get past their fears and anxieties.” Linda (program staff) reinforced this sentiment, when recalling a girl who was blind in a family of avid skiers:

Because she was blind, they did not think she could participate on family ski trips ... After the girl experienced some success and realized that she could learn to ski, she stated, ‘I can go on my

family vacations now, I can be part of my family!’... it just hit me, that’s a whole life of barriers that [*Common Ground* is] able to overcome.

Dean (family member), whose son Larry had been participating in *Common Ground* for nine years, remembered how the program made his son feel as if he was able to do the type of things that individuals without disabilities participated in through the program: “I went on one [whitewater rafting] trip with him. He was really excited about going to do [the type of activities] that everybody else did.” For Edie (program participant), *Common Ground* was “a fun way to get out and go do things. People say, ‘I don’t think you can do that,’ but I try to do things better than anyone can.” Jimmy (participant and program staff) explained that, because of *Common Ground*, “instead of having the mindset of ‘I can’t do something,’ you develop the mindset of ‘what will it take for me to do this?’ That is how we do things here at *Common Ground*!”

Finally, while *Common Ground* does a great deal to overcome social barriers participants experience in their daily lives, they also “overcome a lot of financial barriers ... 95% of our clients are poverty level or below, so the idea of buying an [adapted] skier or doing something like that is just so unrealistic” (Linda, program staff). As exemplified through this statement, the staff working at *Common Ground* are cognizant of the costs of some of the activities and do everything they can to make them financially accessible. Linda went on to explain the importance of controlling these costs in terms of providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities through the program: “[Financial support] is important for all of the ways we are able to impact the community and our participants’ lives.” Emily

(participant) explained the role that this financial assistance has played in her ability to get involved in *Common Ground*: “When I was younger my family traveled a lot ... and I haven’t been able to do that since I left home. To find a place you can do it affordably is amazing.” This sentiment was echoed by Jimmy (participant and program staff), who discussed a program where participants could work for *Common Ground* to cover the cost of the activities. He explained that “Many of us are below the poverty line, and they have an incredible program called ‘work-to-play’ and we can just come in here to [work around the office], and it’s completely free.”

### **Perceived Program Benefits**

Related to the manifestation of the *Common Ground* program mission and culture, individuals articulated numerous benefits stemming from program involvement. Participants identified the following benefits linked to participation: (a) increased confidence and skills, (b) enhanced relationships, and (c) elevated quality of life.

**Increased confidence and skills.** Related to the social barriers individuals with disabilities experience when integrating into society, they can, at times, lack confidence in their skills and abilities (Horn, Toels, Wallace, & Macrina, 1998). For Eliza (program staff), one of the key benefits of *Common Ground* is that participants “can get a social life, and they get self-confidence, and their fears are broken down.” Rick (program staff) explained how this self-confidence was often built through adversity. He recalled working on rafting trips when participants were “saying ‘this is the scariest thing I’ve ever done’ ... at the end they said ‘that was the funest [sic] thing I have ever done!’ It’s cool to pull through that

fear and experience things ... and yet being able to accomplish it.”

Several participants and their family members also discussed building confidence as a key outcome. Dean (family member) talked about how his son Larry had become very confident on the ski slopes. Larry “always takes his camera up and has somebody go down with him. When he comes home he’s all smiles and saying ‘look what I did’ ... He’s pretty confident in himself, he’s gone a couple of years without falling down.” Melanie (family member), who was married to a participant named Jordan, discussed how the confidence gained through involvement in *Common Ground* can go beyond the physical activities that make up the core of the program. Prior to starting an internship with *Common Ground*, Jason “was really starting to lose confidence ... He was wondering if he was ever going to find a good job where he was valued ... [*Common Ground*] picked him up and showed him that it is possible.”

**Enhanced relationships.** Participants, family members, and program staff were in agreement that *Common Ground* programming facilitated better relationships for all involved. Specifically, as noted by Kyle (participant), it enhanced the social opportunities afforded to its participants. “It’s given us opportunities we never would’ve had before, and has helped build friendships.” This effect was not just recognized by participants, but family members as well. MaryBeth, the mother of one of the participants, noted,

Before, people wouldn’t want to be around him. I remember one day, he had been sick the day before, and somebody had told him that they were glad that he was absent...[Now] we go places and he knows people everywhere we go. They all have

such good things to say about him. He is a happy person and he wasn't before.

*Common Ground* also affected friendships in a positive way. Jeff (participant) shared that "I feel like it's another opportunity to just make new friends who share the same interests as you." This feeling was reiterated by Jimmy (participant and program staff), who noted, "Common Ground is really the link in the chain that brings together people with ability and people with disability and gives them, as our name suggests, common ground to stand on." John, a program staff member, noted that "some of the participants have really found friendships and people they can hang with all the time and stuff and I think they got that from this place." Finally, *Common Ground* seemed to affect the support participants received from their family. As Cecil (program staff) noted about one of the families with whom he worked closely, "What was neat about this family was that the father was an occupational therapist so everything he did was focused on his girl." He added "but it was cool seeing the family dynamic of skiing because he felt this was an activity that he was able to participate in [with her] and feel equal."

**Elevated quality of life.** Interviewees agreed that *Common Ground* facilitated a better quality of life for those involved. The effect of the program on the personal health of the participants was discussed often. Jeff (participant) noted that, "I would still be a little bit physical, but not as physical as I am now. I feel like *Common Ground* has given me more options so that I'm not stuck at home." Melanie (family member) agreed that the program had a positive effect on her husband's physical health: "It gets him out of the house and it's healthy for him ... for his physical body ... I just really

appreciate the different outlets he has." Eliza (program staff) was adamant that recreation was an important element of the program that had health benefits. "My education," she explained, "is in exercise physiology and there are immense health gains that people gain from about 30 minutes of activity three times a week ... [health] is increased and improved by people coming in and participating in our activities."

In addition to the physical benefits, several interviewees discussed the personal and social benefits gained through *Common Ground*. Natalie (family member) explained how her son Jordan has found happiness and a sense of purpose through volunteer work he had done with the program: "When I picked Jordan up from [his previous jobs] he would seem depressed. I picked him up after his first few days here and he was consistently smiling ... it was really nice to see." Lenny (participant) asserted that, "Without *Common Ground*, I would be more depressed." Emily (participant) also "struggled with depression ... [*Common Ground*] gives me something to talk about. My family has told me that it's changed me for the better ... I'm more outgoing and in my element ... I have a more positive outlook on life!"

Also related to improving quality of life, data analyses indicated that participants were learning skills at *Common Ground* that could transfer to other facets of their lives. Emily (participant) reflected that when she "was little I didn't like hiking ... then I went on some hikes with *Common Ground* and I was like 'this is quite enjoyable.' Now I do hikes with *Common Ground*, but I also go on hikes with my friends." Jimmy (participant and program staff) was adamant that the "the equipment that *Common Ground* provides makes it so I am able to do things

with my friends without disabilities and my family.” Mary Beth (family member) agreed that skills learned at *Common Ground* affected her son Jason’s family life, and revealed that his involvement in *Common Ground* changed her life, too, “It’s given him more skills and it has improved life for our family and for me personally ... he rides his bike ... I never rode my bike, but now I ride with him and I found a skill I never knew I would enjoy.”

## Discussion

The purpose of the present qualitative case study was to develop an in-depth understanding of *Common Ground*, an outdoor recreation program for individuals with disabilities. In doing so, we address recent calls for targeted research on active individuals with physical disabilities (e.g., Martin & Vitali, 2011). The findings suggest that *Common Ground* participants experience a range of developmental benefits that are shaped by the program culture and philosophy. As captured in Figure 1, results of our two-phase data analysis indicate that *Common Ground*’s program mission created a family-centered environment, encouraged a sense of community, and promoted a person-first approach to working with program participants. At least in part, this culture helped program participants overcome invisible social barriers that can often restrict the activities of individuals with disabilities (Wong et al., 2004). This was facilitated through adaptations that made program activities accessible to individuals with disabilities, efforts made to control the cost of activities, and actively contesting the social barriers participants sought to overcome. As a result of these efforts, participants, family members, and program staff described multiple perceived benefits related to building

confidence in participants’ abilities and enhancing physical and socioemotional quality of life.

*Common Ground*’s efforts to create a family-centered environment support the tenets and assumptions of systems theories (e.g., the sum of whole is greater than the parts, family rules and roles, and the system of feedback loops; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Specifically, our data indicate that when families contain the added dimension of an individual with a disability, they require the flexibility to reevaluate their family boundaries. In the present study, family members reported becoming more open and motivated to actively seek external support to meet not only the needs of an individual family member, but the overall family system. The ability to access resources, especially services like those offered by *Common Ground*, benefits the family as a whole, which allows for a feeling of stability—a central theme of the Core and Balance Framework (Townsend & Zabriskie, 2010; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001).

Through participation in social, leisure, and recreational programs, individuals have been shown to establish an ability to view themselves beyond their disability (Tétreault et al., 2014). Participants in the present case study (participants, family members, and program staff at *Common Ground*) noted that the programming became the center of the system, allowing the family to develop a sense of normalcy and engage with other members in ways that had not been possible before. The family-centered approach taken by *Common Ground*, therefore, helped to nurture common interests among family members (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009) and facilitated relationship building. *Common Ground* not only provided an opportunity for families to interact in this way, but it also afforded

participants opportunities to build relationships with peers outside the family. This allowed participants to interact with one another and program staff in meaningful ways, while reducing some of the caretaking responsibility typically assigned to the family, thus contributing to the functionality of the family system.

## Implications

Results of the present research have implications for outdoor recreation programming for individuals with disabilities. Previous studies have documented that ableism (i.e., discrimination that favors able-bodied individuals) acts as a barrier to participation in outdoor recreation settings (Brittain, 2004; Burns & Graefe, 2007; Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009). In the present study, however, the philosophy of *Common Ground* helped participants overcome social barriers. While barriers faced by individuals with disabilities are often socially constructed (Rimmer & Rowland, 2008), the goal of *Common Ground* is to deconstruct these barriers within the context of inclusive and challenging outdoor recreation activities (Rimmer et al., 2004). In pursuing this goal, program staff encouraged participants to view themselves as individuals first, rather than through the lens of disability. It is important, therefore, that outdoor recreation programs actively challenge and confront stereotypes as part of the programming that they provide.

Many participants discussed specific cognitive predispositions (e.g., beliefs regarding disabilities) as shaping their initial expectations and experiences at *Common Ground*, which related to social identity implications for active individuals with physical disabilities (e.g., Martin, 2007; Shapiro & Martin, 2010). As participants recounted their experiences, many noted that they had a desire to be active,

but had been taught through social interactions with the outside world that there were limits to their abilities (Wong et al., 2004). By participating in *Common Ground*, participants were able to overcome these preconceptions and realize that, with proper support, they were capable of overcoming social and physical barriers to involvement in recreation. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Anderson et al., 1997; McAvoy, 2001; McAvoy et al., 2006; Hough & Paisley, 2008), therefore, program participation led to increased social skills, enhanced self-concept, improved self-confidence, increased well-being, and increased social involvement with groups.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research extends past work examining inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities, it is not without limitations. Specifically, it is essential to acknowledge that *Common Ground's* central mission is not therapeutic recreation, but rather to provide inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities. To build upon the findings of this study, recreation-focused programs for individuals with disabilities such as *Common Ground* should consider adopting the APIE (assess, plan, implement, evaluate) approach (Carter & LeConey, 2004; Carter & Van Anel, 2011). Future work to implement the APIE process would hold the potential to enhance friendships and quality of life among participants, and to break down social barriers while documenting outcomes to support evidence-based practices. Future work also has the potential to enhance and verify present findings by observing other programs with a range of outdoor recreation goals based on an individualized programming strategy. Additionally, observing and/or interviewing participants across multiple recreation

contexts or directly comparing program philosophies, barriers, and perceived benefits in a number of organizations could accomplish this. As the experiences of individuals are likely influenced by family demographic factors, future research should target outdoor recreation participants (and organizations) from a range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and geo-political backgrounds. Such research would provide valuable insights into the range of support systems (i.e., outdoor recreation programs and family types) available to recreation participants across the spectrum of needs and participation.

## Conclusions

As a qualitative case study, this investigation provides insight into participant, family member, and program staff experiences at *Common Ground* in three ways. First, it recognizes barriers that exist at the individual and family levels that may be overcome by organizations like *Common Ground*. Second, it underscores

the importance of developing a program culture and philosophy in creating a therapeutic context for its participants. Finally, it documents a number of perceived benefits for individuals and their family members stemming from program involvement. In making these contributions, the present work responds to the need for a more complete understanding of active individuals with physical disabilities (e.g., Martin & Vitali, 2011) and provides a foundation for theoretically meaningful future research on outdoor recreation programs of this type. From an applied perspective, findings illuminate a number of barriers that need to be addressed as organizations like *Common Ground* aim to offer effective recreation opportunities for individuals with disabilities. By building upon this research and applying the AIPE framework (see Allsop, Negley, & Sibthorp, 2013), scholars and practitioners can continue to develop meaningful recreation activities for individuals with disabilities and their families.

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