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## NAALA in Experiential Education: Beyond Participation

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# NAALA in experiential education: Beyond participation

*Nina S. Roberts, Guest Editor*

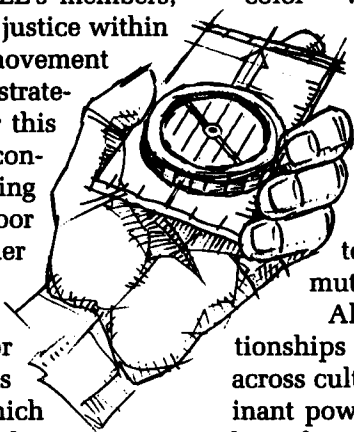
**T**he NAALA (Natives, Africans, Asians, Latinos[as], and Allies) Professional Group was established first as a Special Interest Group in 1990 and after much growth became a Professional Group in 1993. Its mission is to magnify the knowledge of AEE's members, and to advocate for social and economic justice within the experiential and outdoor education movement by developing and implementing new strategies for sharing "power." The theme for this issue, *Beyond Participation*, is meant to convey a critical message. That is, it's one thing for people of color to participate in outdoor and experiential programs, and it's another to consider the experience as a way of life. All too often leaders in the field provide "exposure" to students of color today, and tomorrow these students return to the inequitable world in which they've always existed, and very little change occurs. The key to creating a lasting impact on the lives of our participants, beyond merely participating in certain activities, may lie in cultural exchange. This journal issue is intended to bring the vitality of the rich and varied cultures of both our constituents and leaders to the forefront of experiential education.

As professionals, educators, and students, we've become more alert to the needs and goals of ethnic "diversity," yet I sometimes feel we are lost in a sea of rhetoric and politically-correct colloquialisms. There are questions and concerns about the "diversity movement" as it relates to outdoor education and experiential-based programs. Has this movement been predicated on the expectations of white people? Are people of color stepping far enough out of their comfort zone to get "beyond" the stereotypes which exist? How many white people have concrete answers to the basic question "what does it mean to be white?" Don't whites need to be comprehending the meaning of their own racial identity and status in the dominant racial group before

they can answer this question? Shouldn't people of color examine the ways in which racism impacts the lives of white people? This is certainly a system of advantage which presents all of us—regardless of "color"—with a serious challenge. We teach others, but aren't we all responsible for our own education as well? Moving toward answers to these questions will enable us to enhance our knowledge of self and "others." Intercultural communication takes time and effort—we must be willing to learn what is needed to effectively communicate if we are to move beyond participation into a world of mutual respect and cultural understanding.

Although the basic premise for forming relationships is the ability to communicate, when applied across cultural lines, this undoubtedly involves a dominant power structure. For years NAALA people have been forced to accept the dominant cultural paradigm and demonstrate affinity for the values therein if we want the rewards we sought in the first place. These may be similar or uniquely different based on our respective cultures. Fortunately, we've begun to move beyond internalizing these paradigms as being the "end all be all" to becoming grounded in the paradigms of our own unique cultures. Pertaining to experiential education, some would argue that the bottom line about who benefits from participation is about access to power in all its varying degrees, permutations, and combinations. Others would contend that it isn't about the color of your skin, but about the experience and the meaning of that experience to one's life. Race and racism exist, but they are creations of human minds.

The world of experiential education is not exempt from racist attitudes. Examples of this include: lack of advertisements for programs placed in magazines and newspapers catering to the NAALA community; relegating the status of people of color to "other"; not taking into account cultural preferences and traditions of



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members of particular ethnic groups; courses and/or programs not addressing the varied learning styles of NAALA, perhaps based on a unique culture. There is an element of personal choice in racism; we were all brought up with prejudices but make very different choices about how to handle them. Regardless of race, we are all responsible for challenging and dismantling the negative manifestations of oppression and racism.

It is no secret that people of color (more specifically in America) have been subjected to a long history of inferiorization. The extent of oppression for each ethnic group, however, has a different history depending on the actual origin. As a result, we must recognize both past oppressions and those which continue to exist in order to appreciate difference. While scholars and practitioners are seeking to emphasize the importance of diversity to understanding people's lives, acknowledging diversity is not enough.

Today, we face the new task of going beyond boundaries of mere recognition and inclusion of differences by permitting them to reshape the basic concepts and theories of our discipline. Furthermore, we know that racial divisions do have a social content, that they are not simply the product of personal preferences. It is not Afro-Caribbeans, or Puerto Ricans, or any other racialized group who have "constructed boundaries" with the rest of society. It is the culturally-programmed attitudes of individuals less informed that have established those boundaries by racializing certain social groups and rendering them as "different."

If we could choose racial identities like we choose our clothes every morning, or if we could construct social boundaries from a cultural lego pack, then racial divisions (and sometimes hostility) would be no different from disagreements between lovers of artificial climbing walls and those who prefer natural rock, or between supporters of different outdoor clubs. In other words, there would be no social content to racial differences, but simply prejudice born out of a plurality of tastes or outlooks.

It is important to note that through the years minorities (in America) were considered to be different and thereby labeled as "third world" citizens. These third world communities united in an exercise of crossing nations, engaging in cultural exchange, and coming together for a common goal of fighting oppression. This was during a heated political time in our country when the dominant nations (e.g., Russia, England, U.S.) were exploiting the non-dominant cultures (e.g., Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Indian). The global community therefore became the "first world" versus the "third world." While it is true that most citizens of the U.S. are white, at least 80 percent of the world's population are people of color. As the global community grows and changes, so does our understanding of

why racial labeling is really superfluous to reaching a common goal of social justice. In no way do I mean that culture is unimportant—rather, it is incumbent upon us to embrace difference and remain open to establishing solid relationships across cultures.

Additionally, there is much that we do not yet understand about attitudes and experiences of people of color as relating to outdoor and experiential education; moreover, we have not yet been sufficiently examined through an ethnic-minority lens. Additionally, research on interracial families is relatively limited and, subsequently, there is a lack of research on those of us who are bi-racial. Although some work exists within the fields of sociology and psychology, experiential education has yet to explore the bi-cultural nature and identity development in relation to experiences that these individuals may have in our programs. We need to be heard and attended to. The notion that all ethnic groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the growth of NAALA within experiential education.

All of us must therefore stop accepting the dominant culture as absolute. This is a vicious cycle that continues to be propagated unless challenged. Personal responsibility in embracing cultures that are different from our own, yet maintaining a balance with self-identity, can be a powerful force for social change. As we diversify the field of experiential education, both through the participants we serve and the leaders we train, we must learn to accept differences of varying cultures—that is, having a basic understanding and respect for their beliefs, practices, values, and traditions. We don't have to embrace those cultures, but neither should we be judges of them. That's the reason diversity is important. We have to be willing to accept the people, not necessarily the principles that rule their culture. We don't have to embrace, but we must make efforts to understand the culture from which many of our children come. When we accept and respect the people, regardless of cultural differences, we take a greater step toward social justice.

The articles in this journal can add to the current mix of research and papers that are found in other journals throughout the U.S. and around the world. The articles in this journal call for approaches to gaining knowledge about NAALA that highlight the contextual nature of the lives of people of color. The articles in this special issue also demonstrate the need for action research, involvement of NAALA in research, and the development and fostering of educational, social, and political empowerment strategies that permit people of color to become actively engaged in their own future. One is not called upon to finish the task, but neither is one permitted to abandon it.