The Harvard First-Year Outdoor Program

The Program:
The First-Year Outdoor Program (FOP) is the oldest and largest pre-orientation program for freshmen and transfer students at Harvard. Every year, FOP sends approximately 20% of the incoming first-years on six-day backpacking, canoeing, and camping trips at the beginning of the school year. Housed within the Freshman Dean’s Office, FOP was developed in 1979 by the Freshman Dean to provide students with a stronger support network upon entrance to college. Since then, over five-thousand students have begun their Harvard experience by living with 8-10 peers in the backcountry, under the leadership of 2-3 trained upperclassmen leaders. In 2000, the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) granted the program accreditation, a professional certification shared by a handful of other college outdoor programs in the country.

Why Pre-Orientation?
A significant body of research indicates the significance of the first six weeks of the college experience in adjusting to college life in the long-term. In a survey performed at Harvard in 2005, students indicated that an involvement in a pre-orientation program significantly improved their introductions to Harvard.

Why the First-Year Outdoor Program?
FOP is one of only 47 AEE-Accredited Programs in North America, joining other well-known programs, such as the National Outdoor Leadership School. Research has documented the positive impact of college outdoor orientation programs well beyond college. Other studies have found that college outdoor pre-orientation experiences are correlated with higher academic achievement throughout college.

The Mission:
The First Year Outdoor Program’s mission is to provide group adventure-based experiences that promote the development of social support and self-awareness for first-year students and leadership development for members of the Harvard community.

Central Values:
- Compassion
- The equality and intrinsic worth of all people regardless of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic or socio-economic background
- Responsibility to community
- Care and responsibility to the environment

Leader Training:
All of our leaders have certifications in CPR and Wilderness First Aid, and many of them have other certifications beyond that. Our leader application process is selective, and every leader trainee goes through over one hundred hours of training before leading a trip with our program.
Emergency Response:
Between August 19-24, the FOP Director will be primary emergency contact for the ~35 trips spread out throughout New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont. The Director coordinates Basecamp Headquarters in Lincoln, NH and communicates with two satellite Basecamps in Maine and Vermont. Each of the Basecamps has one to three staff members who are equipped to respond to the logistical needs of trips and to emergencies, should they arise. Our leaders have a cell phone in their medical kits. Though cell phones do not work in most of the places we travel, leaders can sometimes search to find a location where they have enough reception to relay a brief message to Basecamp. We train leaders to develop emergency response plans that involve no cell coverage in addition to plans that involve a working cell phone. Because cell phones have limited coverage and limited battery life, leaders save cell phone use for emergency situations. We must therefore rely on our leaders to contact us. Only in very rare circumstances is Basecamp able to relay messages to trips.

In addition to the cell phones carried in medical kits, all FOP trips also carry satellite-based Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs). PLBs allow trip leaders to send a notification of an emergency via a satellite network. The satellite network is monitored by federal agencies, which will dispatch emergency response should a signal be detected. Given the scale and risks of a wilderness emergency response, FOP trains leaders to activate these devices only in truly exigent situations. They do, however, allow rudimentary communication in areas without cellular coverage.

Contacting FOP:
If you have any questions prior to August 19th or after August 24th, please call the FOP office at (617) 495-7935. From August 19-24, we will be in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, responding to trips’ needs. If you call (617) 495-7935 during that time, the message machine will direct you toward four options:

1) **If you have pressing concerns or questions**, you may call the Freshman Dean’s Office (FDO): (617) 495-1574 and speak with Katie Steele, the Director for Freshman Programming.

2) **If this is an emergency**, you may contact Coz Teplitz, the Director, at the FOP Emergency Line: 617-299-1338.

3) If you have a less pressing concern, you may send an e-mail to fop@fas.harvard.edu. The Director may or may not receive that message that week, depending on how busy Basecamp is in responding to trips.

4) You may leave a phone message at (617) 495-7935 that we will most likely attend to after August 24.

Move-In Day:
On August 24th, we will be coordinating the process of returning over 400 people to campus. Sometimes weather, vehicle changes, and re-routes can impact trips’ arrival time at Harvard. In the unlikely event that all of our students do not arrive back on campus by the morning of August 25th (Move-In Day), we will post a message on our website (fop.fas.harvard.edu) and on the front door of the Freshman Dean’s Office with information regarding the delay. Because of the logistical nature of these situations, staff in the Freshman Dean’s Office will unfortunately have no further information to offer.

Though trips return to campus on August 24th, and students can shower and sleep in their dorm rooms that night, students will still be engaged in FOP programming until late in the evening on August 24th. If you are planning on coming to campus for Move-In Day, we ask that you make plans to meet your student on August 25th and that you follow the Move-In Day procedures as detailed in the Freshman Dean’s Office mailings.

Thank You!
Thank you for supporting your student in choosing FOP. We are honored that you have given us the opportunity and responsibility of welcoming your first-year to Harvard this fall. We are getting all the logistics prepared to make the experience as fun, adventure-filled, and supportive as it can be. Welcome to our FOP community!

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Accredited by the Association for Experiential Education