

VENTURING MAGAZINE

The New Venturing; Advanced Boy Scouts with Girls by Joe Garrett July 2014



As the total youth membership of Venturing continues to fall, it may be time to look at past successes in order to find a path out of our current direction. Venturing, which was created from the splitting of Career Awareness Exploring and Special Interest Exploring, currently has about half as many members as it did at the program launch in 1998. Before the split, the total membership of both Career Awareness and Special Interest Exploring was well above a half million and was growing. The two programs, which are usually thought of as separate, were really the same idea. An Explorer Post would choose an area of special interest, recruit adult leaders and a chartered partner with expertise in that area, and then recruit teens who were interested. The only difference between a Career Awareness and a Special Interest Post was in the nature of the chartered partner and the Post's interest. If it was career (vocationally) oriented, it was one kind of Post and if it was hobby (or avocational) in orientation, then it was the other. The distinction made little difference as both kinds of Posts would operate in the same fashion and participate in national, regional, and council wide events together.

There were Special Interest Posts that focused on backpacking, skiing, scuba, kayaking, canoe racing, mountaineering, cave exploring, horsemanship, Civil War reenacting, sewing, quilting, shooting sports, drill teams, and a wide, wide variety of other hobbies and sports. There were Career Awareness Posts that specialized in law enforcement, medical careers, aviation, the law, fashion merchandising, auto mechanics, military careers and on and on. The two programs, which were really a single idea, had unlimited potential and showed consistent growth from the mid-sixties until they were split up in 1998. One of the main reasons that these two programs were successful at growing was that it was very easy to recruit to the Post Specialties. Since each program was focused on a special area of interest, its members could more easily seek out other youth who had similar interests.



Career Awareness Exploring was divested by BSA and placed in a wholly owned, arm's length subsidiary called the Learning for Life Corporation in 1998. This entity has different leadership and membership standards allowing the chartered partners to select their adult volunteers without running afoul of BSA's membership standards. Unfortunately, the program had almost no support at the National Office and each local council could decide whether to support it or not. The youth membership was not counted in performance metrics for the professional staff, so little effort was put into creating new Posts or supporting existing ones. The result is that, today, there are only 73,153 Explorers, down from about 270,000 in 1998. The same kind of thing has happened to Venturing, but started much later, when the National Office eliminated the Venturing Professional Staff.

Venturing, which was created out of the membership from Special Interest Posts, started in 1998 with 188,010 youth and in four years climbed to 293,323 youth members. The next couple years saw a drop off in membership but another peak, of 261,122 was hit in 2008. During that year, the National Office reorganized, disbanding the Venturing Division and organizing itself along functional rather than program lines. What this means is that Training for all age levels is run by one committee, Program by

another, and Marketing by yet another. In this functional, rather than age specific organization, Venturing gets very little attention while competing with the traditional programs of Cub Scouting, Boy Scouting and Varsity Scouting. With no senior management to advocate for Venturing, membership has dropped precipitously and is now at 127,549, a number about 60,000 less than its starting point in 1998 and significantly less than half its best year in 2002.

The numbers become even more alarming when you combine Venturing and Exploring. In 1998, there were almost 500,000 Venturers and Explorers (not including the 950,000 "in-school" Learning for Life Explorers). Today, there are 200,000. Summarizing, we have lost about 300,000 youth members in programs that were called Exploring 16 years ago.

Recent Developments

After the National office Reorganization eliminated the Venturing Division, a number of decisions were made that affected Venturing directly. Our unique Training Programs were co-opted and adopted for Boy Scouting, losing their unique appeal and "feel" for teens. Some of our Youth Leadership Skills Courses were adapted to younger youth and offered only in the context of Troop Leadership and were often only available at Scout Camps. Our unique Kodiak Leadership Skills Course was changed from a Venturing Program to a Boy Scout Program. The Venturing-specific aspects, along with the high adventure nature of a Kodiak Trek were deemphasized and the mandatory Course Director Training became optional and is rarely taught. The weeklong Kodiak Trek, which began as a National Office sponsored high adventure trek (the first two treks were a 160 mile canoe trip on Alaska's Yukon River and a Philmont Scout Ranch 50 mile backpacking trek) is now just a unit level experience administered by adult leaders who may have never even attended a Kodiak Trek. Much of the adventure component is gone, and the course is often taught at Boy Scout Camp rather than in a wilderness setting.



Around 2011, while searching for the reason membership was dropping, someone noticed that very few Venturers participate in the Bronze, Gold, Silver Venturing Recognition program or in the Ranger, Trust, Quartermaster, or Quest Awards. The number that has been quoted is .66% (yes, less than 1 per cent) of Venturers pursue recognition each year. Instead of focusing on Marketing, or conducting an introspection on what had changed, a decision was made to completely re-invent the Recognition Program and reintroduce it as Rank Advancement similar to the Boy Scout Tenderfoot, second Class, First Class Trial to Eagle. In the post war and Cold War Era, BSA had intentionally dropped this approach because it was found that young adults were interested in career information, adventures, and association with adults, rather than in ranks and camping skill building. This was the reason that Senior Scouting in troops evolved into Special Interest and Career Interest Exploring. This approach has led to the best membership growth and largest membership in Young adult Scouting in BSA's history. Today, however, we have returned to the days the early to mid-20th Century when Scouting for teens was just a bigger and better version of Boy Scouts (of course we now have young women in the program, but it remains to be seen how interested they will be in earning ranks).

	Adventure	Leadership	Personal Growth	Service
Summit				
Pathfinder				
Discovery				
Venturing				

The new Rank Advancement Scheme, called ALPS (Adventure, Learning, Personal Growth, and Service) is a well thought out model for teaching values, life skills, and leadership skills. What it is not, however, is a great method for marketing to young adults. With its emphasis on personal achievement and growth, it misses the point of the earlier Exploring model, which emphasized exploration of careers and hobby interests with an emphasis on association with adults and in partnership with subject

matter expert organizations such as hospitals and scuba shops. The very fact that the earlier approach grew Exploring to nearly a half million teens, while participation in recognition schema appealed to less than half a percent of those young people (about 1500 out of the 220,000 members in 2012) should be a real strong clue to what appeals or does not appeal to them.

This focus on advancement, a standardized progression of skills and learning, and an attempt to impose a kind of focus and discipline on the way the Venturing Program is offered to teens is a serious misstep. The "New Venturing" with its focus on skills development bears more than a passing resemblance to Boy Scouting, which is designed to appeal to pre-teens and younger teens. It is a clear effort to bring Venturing more in line with the rest of Scouting programs, which appeal to younger children and their families. Unfortunately, this missed the very big point that teens are in the process of exploring their own way, and are no longer yearning for family based activities, peer level status competition, or earning badges of accomplishment. They are looking for new experiences, real life achievements (such as scuba certification, for example) and most of all adventures that their families do not or cannot offer them.

It is understandable that, as Venturing membership nosedives, we might try to rein it in and offer more discipline in the way the program is designed and offered at the unit level. This is what has worked well in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts for generations. Or is it? Since 1970, youth membership in Cub and Boy Scouting has dropped from 4,354,000 by almost half, to 2,306,000. Maybe, just maybe, instead of trying to impose program discipline on venturing to make it more like Scouting, we should take a look at the whole enterprise and see if we are still offering what kids of all ages want.

Young people think they know what Scouting is. Because of this, by the time they get to high school it is very difficult to get an audience with them to present a different concept like Venturing. If we want to get an audience with young teens for recruiting, we need to move them past that preconceived idea of merit badges and uniforms; we need to work hard at differentiating Venturing from traditional Scouting. In that respect, we have taken a step backward rather than forward. In order to successfully participate in the new ALPS Advancement, a Venturing Crew will necessarily spend a great deal of its program time and energy pursuing the various requirements instead of working on social and adventure skills building. With Advisor Conferences, mandatory service hours, and Boards of Review, how much time can be left for snowboard lessons? To anyone who has ever served as a Scoutmaster, the new requirements will sound very familiar.

Recruiting for Special Interest versus Recruiting for Life Skills

When Posts and Crews had special focus areas, it was relatively easy to figure out how to promote and recruit membership. If you were a Scuba Post, you looked for teens who were interested in learning how to Scuba dive. If your area of interest evolved as the members acquired new interests, it was still easy to continue to grow, as your new specialty was likely to be attractive to a different audience. A Post that specialized in backpacking might eventually switch to mountaineering for instance. Posts and Crews with different interest areas and special skills would often host each other to outings, sharing their special knowledge and skills. Sea Scout Ships would often host cruises on their boats, for instance. In this new regime, where life skills building and advancement is one of the focuses of every crew, it is hard to see how the program can be marketed to teens. Even within the adult world, special hobby clubs are much more popular than self-help groups.



A quick review of the new advancement program and its administration will reveal that it is modeled closely after the Boy Scout advancement regime. In order for this system to be successful, the adult leadership will necessarily be familiar with Boy Scout Troop administration. This was never true in the previous world of Young Adult Scouting and many, if not most, Crew and Post Advisors were not Scoutmaster alumni. In the future, it will be much harder to recruit adults who are willing and anxious to administer this new program. No longer will we be able to recruit adult leaders who simply want to share their hobby interests with young people. Just as for Scoutmasters, they will need extensive training in order to administer the business of the Venturing Crew. Then, once that hurdle is overcome, they will need to figure out how to attract teens who want to work on recognition and rank advancement. For those of us who have led successful Venturing Crews, the choice will be to completely ignore the new Advancement scheme or to move our Crews over to Learning for Life Exploring where we can pursue special hobby or career interests with our young adult members.