

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Thoughts on Venturing's Future

September 2014

Will your Crew's Program Be Driven by a Special Activity Interest or by Advancement?



Back in the golden age of Exploring when Special Interest and Career Interest Exploring together were approaching a half million youth members, along with nearly 1 million Learning for Life (in-school high school based) Explorers, each Post's program was driven by an area of special interest to the members and by the Seven Experience Areas.

(Yes, you read that right: In 1997, there were over 1.4 million teens enrolled in all aspects of Exploring. That included an in-school career awareness program in major metropolitan school districts. Compare that with today's TOTAL BSA membership of all youth, Cubs, Boy Scouts, Varsity, Venturing and Exploring, in ALL programs. 1.9 million).

The idea was that in addition to its unique activities each Post should schedule at least one activity a year in each of the following experiences:

1. Social
2. Outdoor
3. Service
4. Career
5. Fitness
6. Leadership
7. Citizenship

These were planning guidelines for all Posts, whether a career oriented Law Enforcement Post, a Drill Team, or a Mountaineering Post. The reasoning behind the Seven Experience Areas was that each Post had its own specialty but that every Explorer should have a well-rounded experience each program year, too. The responsibility for planning and programming rested on the Post youth and adult leadership and was somewhat determined by the resources of the chartered partner, often an institution with deep knowledge in the special interest of the post. A scuba shop would be a good example, or a hiking club.

In 1998, when Venturing was created from Special Interest Exploring the Career Interest Posts were spun off to the Learning for Life Corporation and Career was dropped as an Experience area within the newly minted Venturing Program. The other Six Experience Areas remained, but have not received the same emphasis as before. Also, the concept of Special Interest Crews has been de-emphasized in favor of a more general interest, less structured approach driven by the evolving interests of the Crew members at any given time. This was partially caused by the loss of recruiting information which had previously been obtained through Career and Hobby Interest Surveys conducted in the public schools. With these survey results, it had been possible to find youth who were interested in specific hobby or career interests such as whitewater rafting or airline piloting. Where Exploring



had little contact with Boy Scout Troops, the new Venturing Crew was encouraged to team up and even to recruit from Troops. This has caused a fair amount of antipathy between the two programs where there was far less under Exploring.

The latest scheme for Venturing includes advancement "pillars" of activities that drive a Crew's planning and program. This advancement scheme includes a "joining" badge called the Venturing Award, and a progression through the Discovery, Pathfinder, and Summit Awards. Each of these ranks is recognized by a unique patch to be sewn on the pocket of the official green Venturing uniform shirt just as is done in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. It is significant that the uniform is now officially part of the advancement and recognition of the individual Venturer. What are more significant, though, are the demands on a Crew and its leadership in order to participate in this new program. First, a significant amount of individual tracking is required from the moment a new prospect visits a Crew meeting. Advisor Interviews and Conferences must be conducted, induction ceremonies and prescribed individual trainings are required. Participation in District and Council events is necessary, drawing the Crew and its leadership closer to the Boy Scout community. Significant service activities are now required not just of the individual but also of the Crew and must be tracked. At least half of these service hours must be accomplished as a Crew activity rather than as individual effort. Individual training in goal setting, time management, and project management must be completed, and a formal BSA course in leadership or equivalent are required. All of these activities are commendable and many existed in the previous Bronze, Gold, and Silver progression, but required less attention by the Crew itself.



The area where the new rank scheme differs greatly is that it imposes a burden on the Crew to participate in many hours, days, and weeks of activities in support of rank advancement. It requires that the entire Crew participate, where much of the previous Bronze, Gold, Silver requirements were based on individual effort and initiative. The Service Requirement, for example, includes a total of 60 hours of service of which at least half must be accomplished in Crew activities. This requires the Crew to participate in a minimum of 30 hours of service projects before a single member can achieve this level of rank. Several of the leadership courses require a full week of attendance and are offered only once a year requiring participating Crews to attend en masse. The individual Venturer, over the course of the four ranks, must participate in 7 separate Tier II and Tier III adventures and help plan one of them. It appears that Tier II adventures are overnights and Tier III adventures must last more than 4 nights. While it is hard to argue that any of these requirements are inappropriate, the net effect on a Crew is to pre-define much its operations. In order for any one member to participate in rank advancement, the Crew is required to commit significant resources, time, and energy to the effort. This is exactly how Cub Scouting and Boy Scouting Unit programs are structured and advancement in each of those age groups defines the entire program from beginning to end. Advancement through the ranks dictates virtually every moment of a Pack or Troop's activities, enforcing an intentional uniformity across groups. This appears to be the intent, or the unintended consequence, behind the new Pillars. A Crew, in order to be "successful" must participate in this program and except for the nature of its individual weekend activities, must dedicate the lion's share of its effort to administering the new rank progression. This has never been the case before in Venturing or in Exploring since their inception in the 1950's. In other words, Venturing is no longer intended to be the free-form program for exploring individual recreational interests that it once was.

A quick review of the new advancement requirements can be seen here:
www.scouting.org/filestore/program_update/pdf/220-855_LowRes2.pdf

For many years, Exploring had no official uniform. It's true that in the 50's, 60's and 70's the Forest Green Uniform was available, but it was dropped in 1979, re-introduced in 1985, dropped again in 1990, and brought back again about 10 years later. This ambivalence at the national level was borne of the idea that young adults were not generally interested in uniforms or in a Boy Scout-like program. The on-again off-again nature of Awards also reflected this ambivalence.

Rank has never been part of Exploring or Venturing until this introduction of the new "Pillars" scheme this summer. The new program was introduced because an embarrassingly few teens (about 0.7%) participated in the Bronze-Gold-Silver recognition program introduced in Venturing in 1998. It is difficult to tell whether this was a problem with the implementation of the awards or a general lack of interest among teens. Time will tell if the new advancement scheme is any more successful with young people. At the National level, there is a new initiative to test the quality of all Scouting Programs by measuring the level of participation in advancement. As applied to Venturing, this is a misfire of epic proportions and is probably what is behind the current obsession with ranks for teens.

Now, for the first time since the 1950's we have ranks, uniforms, The Scout Oath and Law (instead of the Explorer Code or the Venturing Oath) and much of our special training curriculum has been diluted or merged into Boy Scout training. This march into the distant past began quietly with the dissolution of the Exploring Division and elimination of dedicated Explorer Executives and Districts in 1998. This was driven in part by divestment of the career oriented programs to the Learning for Life Corporation.

This was done in order that large employers such as the federal government and public employee unions could continue to sponsor Career Interest Explorer Posts without alienating their employees. There is no ban on gay adult leaders or youth members in Learning for Life. Leadership selection is left entirely up to the sponsoring organization.

Before that, in larger Councils there were dedicated Executives and Explorer District Committees specializing in support of the "Young Adult Division of BSA". There was a National Exploring Magazine and many National Events such as Road Rallies, Explorer Olympics, and special events at the National High Adventure Base at Philmont. Exploring was administered at arms-length from Cub and Boy Scouting in recognition to the idea that, in order to appeal to teens, it needed to be unique and more mature in its implementation. Many larger Councils held Explorer Leadership Conferences annually at hotels, resorts, and conference centers in an effort to appeal to older youth with a unique experience. Much of the program was intentional in its appeal to teens as Young Adults rather than as children.

The new Venturing Program is merging back into khaki shirt Scouting where it came from over 70 years ago and is showing signs of a condescending attitude toward teens. It no longer has the support of a dedicated National Staff, nor does it have dedicated professionals in the field. There are no longer National events for Venturers and the magazine has been gone for decades. It is possible that Venturing will find a new purpose as the coed adjunct to Boy Scout Troops, going car camping and participating in Scout Camps, Camporees, and the occasional backpacking trip but this style of Venturing does not have the broad appeal of the older Venturing Program or of Exploring. What has changed is that the free-form, creative, dynamism of Venturing seems to be discouraged. Gone are the Leadership Conferences, High Adventure Kodiak Treks, and Exploring Districts. Advancement participation is now a quantifiable attribute and because it can be measured, it will become even more important. This is a

common critical thinking error, focusing on that which can be measured at the expense of what is important.

At its peak, Exploring had nearly a half million traditional members and nearly a million in-school participants. In the first year after the split in 1998, Venturing had 202,164 members and Career Exploring had about 211,000. In 2002, Venturing hit its historic peak membership at 293,323. It hit a second peak in 2008 at 261,122 members. Since then both have dropped consistently and we now stand at half that at 133,560 Venturing members and 77,325 Explorers on June 1, 2014. Every month, the numbers get worse. It appears that, rather than attempt to reinvigorate the program, we are going to return it to Scouting orthodoxy and satisfy ourselves with a much smaller number of youth participants in a program with much stricter program controls.