

VENTURING MAGAZINE

What's in Store for Venturing? by Joe Garrett

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According to Tico Perez, National Commissioner of the Boy Scouts of America, a recommendation will be forwarded to BSA's National Board of Directors in January to eliminate the Cub Scout Promise and Law of the Pack, and the Venturing Oath, both to be replaced with the Boy Scout Oath and Law. The stated purpose of this recommendation is to consolidate all three programs under one statement of values. Also to be eliminated is the two fingered Cub Scout salute and sign along with the full hand Venturing salute and sign. While these changes, if adopted, are likely to have little effect on most Venturers and Crews, they represent more steps in the process of consolidating the two programs and their resources that began when the National Venturing Division was disbanded a couple of years ago. Up until that time, there were several senior staff members at the National Office whose sole responsibility was to promote and administer Venturing while developing such innovations as the Kodiak and Powder Horn training courses, the Venturing Silver and Ranger Awards, and the Venturing and Ranger Handbooks.

Earlier, Venturing's unique Kodiak Leadership Skills curriculum represented a unique opportunity for Venturers to acquire advanced leadership and a high adventure "life experience". The first course, a weeklong trek, was delivered in very small groups and included trust exercises, facilitated discussions, and introspections. Five leadership "commissions" were delivered during the week. Often, the small group facilitators were Venturers who had already completed the course and only the Course Director and assistants were adults. The follow-on course, called Kodiak-X, was a weekend in which two more commissions were added. These courses were always open to teens from other youth programs including Boy Scout Troops, church youth groups, and members of other agencies such as the YMCA, but were delivered in the context of a Venturing Crew and most often during a high adventure experience. Each course was required to have an adult leader on staff who had attended a formal weekend Course Director's Conference (CDC).



Today, the Kodiak experience has had its Venturing context stripped and is instead a BSA-wide leadership skills course for teens. Kodiak-X has been eliminated, replaced with the new Mentoring course, and the high training standards for adult course directors have been relaxed, allowing adult leaders who have never attended a Kodiak Trek to now lead them. The course content hasn't changed much, but its soul as a coed Venturing event has been removed. Leadership training for Boy Scouts is rarely coed, tends to be a more nuts and bolts oriented and has a tendency to occur at Scout Camps using Scouting programming such as the Patrol Method. There is nothing wrong with this approach, which is oriented towards the 14 year old boy who has recently been elected Senior Patrol Leader or Patrol Leader but it deviates from the original intent of Kodiak, which was to offer a high adventure trek that also provided real world leadership material for youth 16 to 21 years old. The first several Kodiak Treks offered were a backpacking trek at Philmont National Scout Ranch, a 150 mile raft trip on Alaska's Yukon River, a sea kayaking trek in South Carolina, and a 100 mile whitewater trek in Oregon. They were all coed, and bore little resemblance in structure to a Boy Scout Troop or Patrol.

The old Venturing youth training series started with the Crew Officers Briefing, a Venturing Leadership Skills Course, a Kodiak Trek, and then Kodiak-X. All of these courses were specific to Venturing youth and all were ordinarily taught in a coed forum. Today the



continuum goes Introduction to Leadership Skills for Crews (ILSC), Venturing Crew Officers Orientation, National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT), a Kodiak Challenge, and/or National Advanced Youth Leadership Experience. National Youth Leader Training is focused more on how to run a Troop than on esoteric leadership concepts and is rarely taught in a coed environment as girls are not allowed to join Troops. It is a six day course typically taught at a Scout Camp. It focuses on how to run a Boy Scout Troop and emphasizes the Patrol Method, which involves breaking your Troop into smaller teams in order to encourage youth leadership among younger Scouts. This model is inappropriate to the majority of Venturing Crews as their typical size does not allow for multiple small teams. A 14 year old boy in a Troop is a senior member of that Troop, while that same young man would most likely be one of the youngest members of a Venturing Crew. Coed Venturing Crews tend to elect more young women to leadership positions than young men, and the newly combined leadership courses run by adults with a Boy Scouting background are very often not equipped to accommodate young women, nor is the material focused on their needs. In Venturing there is less of a cookbook approach to program and calendar and no two Crews have the same interests, dynamics, or leadership practices.



Another Venturing specific training course that has been modified is Powder Horn, a course that was originally aimed specifically at Venturing Crew Advisors and invited subject matter experts to provide orientation to (typically) 16 high adventure sports interests during a weeklong Scout Camp experience. The 16 sports were selected out of the Ranger Award's 18 electives and 8 core requirements. This course is no longer exclusively an adult leadership course, nor is it specific to Venturing. Today this course is offered to all Scouting adults, to Boy Scouts aged 14 and up and to Venturers 13 and up. As a practical matter, Powder Horn was a great idea for a course that never had much practical payoff. Its stated purpose was to introduce Venturing adults to resources necessary for the conduct of such high adventure activities as Scuba, mountaineering, cave exploring, or hunting. In practice, if a Crew didn't have these resources within its membership, the activities were not likely to be successful because of the depth of knowledge and experience necessary to lead a group in one of these sports. For example, if your Crew decided to take up Scuba diving, there is little benefit in attending a weeklong training that spends only 2 hours with a local Scuba instructor. You are better served to go find a Scuba shop that is willing to work with your Crew, teaching courses, renting equipment, and providing Dive Masters for your Scuba weekends.



It is rumored that another committee is considering eliminating or modifying the Venturing Recognition programs: Silver, Gold, Bronze, Ranger, etc.. The thinking behind this is that not enough Venturers are participating in the programs to make them worthwhile to continue. It is reported that only about 5% of Venturers complete the Silver Award. This is nearly the same percentage as Scouts who earn their Eagle Award, Scouting's most venerated achievement, but it misses the entire purpose of these awards, which is to focus Venturers and Crews on the skills necessary to pursue their Crew specialties. It is inappropriate and misleading to compare Scouting's Eagle Award to Venturing's Silver Award, as the two achievements occur in dissimilar environments. Advancement is one of the "Methods" of Scouting, and working on badges is central to the entire Boy Scout experience. A new Scout is expected to begin working on his Tenderfoot, Second Class and First Class ranks as soon as he joins a Troop, between ages 10 and 11. His Troop will ordinarily offer the teaching of the skills necessary to earn these badges as a central theme in its calendar and program. This teaching is part of the program for his older peers, who are expected to teach him the skills they have only recently learned themselves; things like knife sharpening, map and compass reading, and knots. In fact, the entire Troop experience for a younger Scout is defined by mastering the skills necessary to

achieve First Class Rank and then teaching them to younger Scouts. After achieving First Class, a young Scout is felt to be ready to start leading and so Troops are broken up into smaller Patrols in order to offer more leadership opportunities. His advancement efforts then become more of an individual effort, and as he pursues merit badges and he is encouraged to pursue some his own interests as there are well over 100 merit badge subjects. In addition to being the center of many Troop activities, the Boy Scout advancement program is strongly supported by weeklong annual Scout Camp attendance. Most of the skills necessary to advance to First Class are taught at Scout Camp, and many of the more common Merit Badges are also offered. A Troop or individual Scout who does not attend an annual summer camp is at a severe disadvantage when it comes to advancement. Since this advancement is so central to the Boy Scout experience, it virtually drives most Troops' annual calendar planning. Venturing has no such emphasis or consensus on what skills should be acquired by a young adult. Camping is not central to the program, nor is leadership as strongly emphasized. Venturing has no program cookbook, nor does it generally encourage universal training subjects, with the possible exception of First Aid.

Eliminating the National Venturing Recognition Awards will have an impact on the way many Crews are run. It is possible that it will have no impact on the majority of Crews, however, as it is true that most Venturers never seriously participate in the Bronze Awards. In the case of a Crew that uses the 18 electives and 8 core requirements of the Ranger Award as a menu for its annual program planning, loss of the awards may cause a loss of focus in the way the program year is planned. In my crew, for example, we tried to stay focused on activities that would assist our members in earning their Outdoor Bronze Awards. Each year, every member had an opportunity to earn their Watercraft, Winter Sports, and Cooking electives through annual Crew activities. Then we focused on Outdoor Living History some years, Equestrian, and even Shooting Sports in other years. Each year we made certain that each Venturer had an opportunity to take First Aid, Leave No Trace, and Cooking training. We backed all of these efforts up with certifications where possible. American Red Cross, American Canoe Association, National Rifle Association, and even local Food Handlers Permits are examples of sources for these credentials. Without the Ranger Award to focus our efforts, we would have still gone whitewater rafting, skiing and snowboarding, and shooting, but it is unlikely that we would have taken the time to do such thorough training. We certainly would not have spent as much time on First Aid, Food Handling, or Communications.



Not so long ago, the Venturing Leadership Award (VLA) was modified so that adult leaders are no longer eligible for this recognition. Originally, the VLA was introduced as a way to recognize significant contributions by both youth and adults to Venturing at the Council, Region, Area, and National level. The award commonly recognized significant contributions by leaders of Venturing Officers Associations, National, Regional, Area, and Council Venturing Committees, and training events such as Kodiak, Powder Horn, and Wood Badge. After the National Venturing Division was eliminated, a committee recommended eliminating this recognition altogether. National Venturing Youth Officers are said to have pushed back on this decision and saved the award for youth members but not for adults. This is a shame, as this was the one Venturing specific award for adults who make an extraordinary contribution to the program. There is no other Venturing specific recognition for adults who make a significant contribution. The traditional District Award of Merit and Silver Beaver are very rarely awarded to adults who restrict their Scouting volunteerism to Venturing. The tradition of having a separate adult recognition for Venturing goes all the way back to the early 1970's when the Spurgeon Award was introduced in Exploring specifically to address this oversight.

It appears to me that 14 years ago a group of Scouting pioneers set out to create an exciting new program for young adults, essentially from scratch, honoring and incorporating ideas and experiments that had been used in Senior Scouting, Explorer Scouts, and Exploring since the end of World War II. This group wrote their own training curricula, invented their own recognition program, and injected a culture of independence and creativity into BSA's coed Young Adult Program that caused it to grow to over 260,000 members in less than a decade. Unfortunately, this group of innovators was operating outside the political sphere of the majority of adult Scouters who came up through Cub Scouting and Boy Scouting. There has been a level of suspicion and mistrust between Venturing and veteran Scouters at every level from the Local Scout Troop up through the District, Council, and National Offices almost since the birth of Venturing. The very name of the program, Venturing, is an adaptation of a little used program from Boys Scouts, the Venture Patrol. When the new Venturing Division asked that the obscure term Venture Patrol be dropped in order to avoid confusion between the two programs, the Boy Scout Division refused and has refused to do so ever since. The result has been 14 years of confusion and we still have people incorrectly using the terms Venture Crews, Venture Scouts and Venture Advisors because of this lack of coordination at the National Office. (I was told this story personally by one of the original three Directors of the then new Venturing Division). Today, the Training Chairmen, Advancement Chairmen, and Program Chairmen at every level of Scouting are asserting their authority over what they view as the renegade program of Venturing. Membership is down to 230,000 members in only two years, the number of Crews has dropped by a thousand, and the number of adult Venturing leaders has dropped in direct proportion. If you are a Venturing Crew Advisor and you decide to conduct a Kodiak Challenge (Trek) for your Crew, you now have to get permission from a Council Training Chair who might be the same Scoutmaster who was accusing you of "Stealing his boys" two years ago. There is a very real chance that you might not be allowed to run a course if it is coed, or if it involves a sport that is not friendly to traditional Scouting, or if you want to go somewhere that the Training Chair doesn't approve of. If you submit a completed application for the Silver Award or Venturing Leadership Award for one of your Venturers, there is a very real possibility that you will have to "fight the system" in order to get the award approved. There are plenty of scouters out there who would impose stricter requirements on these awards if they got the chance. A good example is the oft reported additional requirement for a District or Council Advancement Committee to review Silver Awards. There is no such requirement in the rules or regulations for the Silver Award, and the process of review is intentionally left to the candidate's Crew.

What appears to be happening in Venturing is a consolidation of control under the various functional committees rather than under experienced Venturing focused leadership. This may not be a bad thing in the long run, but for the near term, much of Venturing's soul is being stripped away, its best features are being homogenized and modified to accommodate the Boy Scout program which is neither aimed at older teens nor young women. Taken as a whole, the changes that have been implemented over the past three years imply dissatisfaction with Venturing, its structure, and its features at the National Office. At the time that these changes began, Venturing membership was at its peak of over 260,000. Today, as Venturing has been de-emphasized and modified, its membership has sunk to 232,000. While it is not clear that the changes and proposed changes are the cause of our membership decline, it is clear that these changes are not being made in reaction to that decline since the changes came first.