

## ...HIGH QUALITY?

### TELLING GOOD PROGRAMS FROM BAD ONES

A wide range of programs are available within the experiential education (EE) profession. For the unfamiliar client, identifying high-quality programs can be very difficult, especially with the diversity of missions, client populations, and activity offerings. Key considerations to aid in identifying good programs are described below.

### CONSIDERATIONS

Investment in the program's purpose supports the motivation to provide quality programming.

1. When a program **mission** aligns with values of client care and positive experience, these values are likely to be present in practice.
2. Programs that are clear on the needs of the **population** they serve will often meet those needs. Integration of needs assessment into program practices enhances quality.
3. Quality programs intentionally have activity offerings that fit well with the population and mission. Programming should reflect an informed use of EE aligned with purpose.

High-quality programs thoughtfully apply safety systems through every aspect of their program.

4. Quality organizations have well-developed **risk management plans** in use as evidenced by: marketing that acknowledges risks, documents that inform clients about risk, well-delivered guidelines for managing risk presented during instruction of activities, thoroughly trained staff, and well outlined emergency response systems.
5. **Accreditation** involves enlisting an outside organization, such as AEE, to: review a program against a set of defined standards, determine if these standards are met, and recommend action to improve the unmet standards. EE programs that go through an accreditation process demonstrate a strong desire to provide high quality programming.

6. **Industry standards** represent the up-to-date expectations for operating an effective program. Quality programs will strive to meet or exceed industry standards and will update their practices as these standards evolve. Developing **professional affiliations** and maintaining current memberships with organizations relevant to the program, like AEE, are critical to understanding standards.

Healthy organizations welcome concerns and address them effectively, leading to improved program quality and safety practices. How does the culture encourage people to speak up about their concerns? How are concerns handled? Do staff feel supported? How is the organization regarded in the community? How do quality programs develop such feedback loops?

7. Targeted dialogue to **survey stakeholders** creates a pathway for feedback. Taking the time to ask for feedback from clients, staff, volunteers, managers, board members, community partners, and others is valuable to identify issues and improve the program.
8. Programs can improve by **assessing and evaluating** their work and operations using outcome-oriented measures, client surveys, or other assessment instruments.
9. Quality programs can intentionally seek feedback by **involving entities** from outside their own organization to better inform their practices and gain fresh perspective.

This collection of considerations provides a useful framework for clients to determine a program's quality. Since a deep understanding of each consideration is needed to effectively decide on whether to engage with a program, seek further resources to inform your choice.

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# FURTHER RESOURCES

## READING

Baierlein, J. A. (2019). *Risk management for outdoor programs: A guide to safety in outdoor education, recreation and adventure*. Viristar LLC.

Hirsch, J. & Sugerman, D. A. (2007). *Administrative practices of AEE accredited programs*. Association for Experiential Education.

Smith, S. (2021). *Beneficial Risks: The evolution of risk management for outdoor and experiential education programs*. Sagamore-Venture.

Warren, K., Mitten, D., & Loeffler, T. A. (2008). *Theory & Practice of Experiential Education*. Association for Experiential Education.

## VIEWING

*Accreditation program manual*

*AEE certification credentialing manual*

*Manual of accreditation standards for adventure programs*

*Manual of accreditation standards for outdoor behavioral healthcare programs*

Program Accreditation: <https://www.aee.org/application-and-documents>

American Mountain Guides Association: <https://amga.com/>

Association for Challenge Course Technology: <https://www.acctinfo.org/>

American Camping Association: <https://www.acacamps.org/>

Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Council: <https://obhcouncil.org/>