

Mountain-based Adventure Education in Canada

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Executive Summary:

The Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) outsourced training and certification to a sole external provider, Thompson Rivers University (TRU). In 1996 the Adventure Programs Department signed an agreement with the ACMG to administer the ACMG training courses and certification exams and in 2004 the Adventure Department took on full responsibility for mountain guide training and certification in Canada as the sole provider. This new program is called the Canadian Mountain and Ski Guide (CMSG) and includes both internationally recognized levels of certification; the full mountain guide and the aspirant mountain guide. The Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) took a different path and offers professional level training and certification through the association. The Adventure Diploma at TRU takes a different course and moves adventure training to the highest level. The program philosophy is oriented around the combination of classroom courses focused on small business development and field courses, which emphasize technical skill and leadership development.

Two questions will be addressed in this paper.

Why is education, training and certification important for mountain user groups, land managers and commercial operators?

What are the characteristics of an effective educational offering that will appeal to all these stakeholders?

Reasons for training and certification

There are many reasons for training and certifying outdoor leaders. The adventure industry has two major components: technical activities and a wilderness setting. For mountain-based practitioners this typically means adventure sports such as hiking and climbing and a natural environment, in which these activities take place. Both the activities and the environments challenge the user, as both have inherent levels of risk associated with them. There is typically the potential for accidents and fatalities.

A good training and certification program will serve to increase the level of professionalism in the industry. Reducing the environmental impact and ensuring the achievement of the program objectives will help to achieve this goal. Training in decision-making skills will not only serve to ensure a positive experience for participants, but also reduce the number of accidents.

An outdoor leader has numerous responsibilities. The ability to take care of oneself is of utmost importance, as a leader who is sick or injured will have difficulty doing anything productive for others. The primary responsibility of the leader is his/her guests, clients, or group. The safety and well being of these participants is the direct responsibility of the leader. The participants' enjoyment of the activity is directly linked to the skills and abilities of the leader. Beyond the immediate demands of the participants, the leader is also responsible to his/ her employer. The financial viability of a company will be dependent on each and every employee. Consideration for the sport, activity, or Profession must also be given, as poor performance by one outdoor leader will reflect on all leaders. Respect for the environment must be an underlying theme for all outdoor leaders. It is frequently the majesty of the natural environment that draws people to recreate outside. For example: the natural beauty of Yushan Peak draws visitors from around the world, but if the mountain is littered with garbage, fewer people will come. The final responsibility of a leader is to other people that may share the location.

This brings us to the question of how to set up a training program. There are a number of methods, which are effective in the development of outdoor leadership. These methods should be used in combination and not in isolation. The starting point is quite often a basic training course. This is to be followed by an accumulation of personal experience. There is no substitute for this component of personal development. It is essential for an aspiring outdoor leader to spend significant amounts of time immersed in the technical activity. Additional training courses, interspersed with personal skill development are most effective. Once a baseline of competence has been developed, the aspirant leader should begin to work with participants. Initially this will be in a practicum position, and then move into an assistant role and ultimately become fully responsible for a group of participants. At some point a mentoring relationship with a more experienced leader will be of great benefit. This is the model that we have worked to create in Western Canada.

Canadian Context

In Canada there are three segments of the mountain user group. There are recreational users who are represented through the Alpine Club of Canada. There are educational users. These are school groups typically led by school teachers. The most organized group is the commercial users. This is the group that this paper will focus attention on. These commercial users are well organized with Industry Associations that represent active professionals and provide certification.

The context that adventure providers work within in Canada includes minimal government influence. There is no legal framework or legislation in place to control adventure leadership. This is very different from France, where it is illegal to act as a mountain guide unless you are certified by the IFMGA. Although anyone can call themselves an outdoor leader or guide in Canada, the legal precedent is set by what is termed “standard common practice”. This term refers to the standard practices that everyone else is using. For example, if everyone else is using helmets for climbing, anyone not using helmets could be considered legally liable if an accident were to occur that could have been prevented through helmet use.

There are some requirements and restrictions imposed by Government land managers. These restrictions vary depending on the branch of government. There are three different government organizations responsible for land management; one at the national level and two at the provincial level. The five mountain National Parks require mountain guide certification and insurance in order to get a permit to operate. The Provincial Parks and Crown Land (Public land) only require insurance. At all levels the permit application process can be a lengthy one.

Training Models used in Canada

There are three different training and certification models in Canada.

The Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) has outsourced training and certification to an external provider. There is an agreement between the ACMG and Thompson Rivers University (TRU) with TRU as the sole provider of ACMG training and certification. The ACMG is responsible for oversight on standards. TRU is responsible for all course delivery and programming logistics including instructor hiring and facility bookings.

The Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) offers professional level training and certification through the association. Recreational level training is offered by professional members and supported by the association through curriculum development.

First Aid training and certification is provided by many independent companies. There is no standard curriculum, only some common practices. The norm for adventure leaders and guides is an 80-hour wilderness oriented course. The curriculum offered by the various companies varies somewhat, but there are enough commonalities that most first aid training providers will recognize their competitors certificates when it comes to re-certification.

Framework for Mountain Guide Training

The International Federation of Mountain Guides Association (IFMGA or UIAGM) has 21 member countries and an additional three candidate countries. It was formed in 1965 by the mountain guide

associations from France, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. The Technical Committee of the IFMGA sets the international standard as a minimum requirement for each of the three guiding skill areas (ski, rock, alpine). Two levels of international certification are recognized; the full mountain guide and the aspirant mountain guide. The guide candidate will ultimately complete exams in ski, rock and alpine and at each of the two levels. At the heart of the IFMGA mission statement is concept that there is a common international level of training and that certified guides will be recognized worldwide.

The ACMG was formed in 1963 and became a member of the IFMGA in 1972. There is a strong link between the Canadian guiding community and European guides. There has been a steady influx of European guides into Canada. Many of them have come to work in the Canadian heliski industry, which is responsible for 80% of the global market. This cross-fertilization of ideas and techniques has been beneficial to both Canada and the European countries.

The Canadian guiding community is not large, especially when compared to Europe. There are 150 fully certified mountain guides in Canada, compared to 1700 in each of France, Austria and Switzerland. The ACMG has also decided to recognize “specialized” guides. These specialty guides are fully certified but in only one or two of the three categories. The total membership of the ACMG including the disciplines of ski, rock, alpine, hiking, top rope climbing and climbing gyms is 700. The breakdown of specialty guides is as follows:

Ski Guides	114
Assistant Ski Guides	114
Alpine Guides	10
Assistant Alpine Guides	44
Rock Guides	13
Assistant Rock Guides	77

The ACMG is a professional association and not a labour union. The association made attempts in the past to recommend a “suggested guides daily rate”. This was the subject of much debate, however the ACMG received legal advice which suggested that setting a guide’s daily wage could be considered an illegal form of “price fixing” under Canadian law. Since that time, the average daily rate has floated based on market demand. Generally, it has risen slowly over the last few years. Wages for Canadian guides vary according to the level of certification and type of work. The highest wages are paid in the heliski industry. The lowest wages are paid in the climbing gyms.

Mountain guide - CAN\$ 275-400

Alpine or Ski guide - \$250-330

Assistant guide - \$225-300

Climbing Gym Instructors - \$10/hour

Thompson Rivers University (formerly University College of the Cariboo)

In 1992 the Adventure Guide Diploma was developed by Ross Cloutier and Iain Stewart-Patterson. This was the first time in Canada if not the world, that “Adventure” was offered as a curriculum area at a post-secondary institution. The model was based on the premise that current industry certification was an essential job credential. Agreements were made with all the major industry associations to incorporate their certificates into the Adventure Diploma. Twenty-two students entered the diploma that year. Over the past 17 years, Adventure training has become very popular with colleges and universities. There are now over 65 public and private training institutions in Canada offering some form of adventure training. TRU Adventure trainings have now expanded from the original two-year diploma, to include a one-year Adventure Sports Certificate and an Adventure Major and Minor within the Bachelor of Tourism Management.

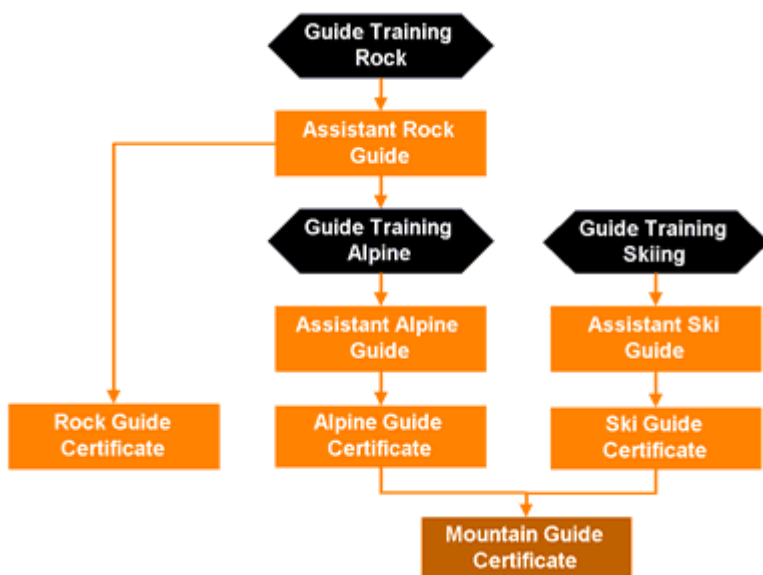
Comparison between TRU Adventure Studies, NOLS and Outward Bound

The Adventure Diploma at TRU takes adventure training to the highest level. The program philosophy is oriented around the combination of classroom courses focused on small business development and field courses, which emphasize technical skill and leadership development. Entry into the Adventure Diploma is limited and competitive. Students enter the program with competence in at least one technical skill area. During the second year of the program, they have the opportunity to specialize in one or more technical skill areas and may have sufficiently well developed skills to receive industry certification. For example, 10% of past students are now active members of the ACMG, which represents 10% of the total ACMG membership. The instructors working in the Adventure Diploma are recognized as being among the best in Canada. There are ten full-time faculty members and 25-30 part-time faculty members in the Adventure Studies Department. The part-time faculty members are selected based on their demonstrated expertise not only as guides, but also as teachers. They typically spend their non-TRU time as active guides. Other institutions have tried to copy TRU’s Adventure programs, but they have been unable to match the level attained. The program offerings of Outward Bound and NOLS are very different from the TRU programs, but do provide excellent preparation for students who would like to apply for the Adventure Diploma.

CMSG Guide Training and Certification

In 1996 the Adventure Programs Department signed an agreement with the ACMG to administer the ACMG training courses and certification exams. In 2001 this evolved into the Adventure Department becoming fully responsible for the delivery of the program. Finally in 2004 the Adventure Department took on full responsibility for mountain guide training and certification in

Canada as the sole provider. The ACMG retained an advisory capacity. This new program is called the Canadian Mountain and Ski Guide (CMSG)



Entry into the Hiking, Skiing, Rock and Alpine training programs is based on completion of the following minimum prerequisites. The Ski program has a limited number of spaces and a large number of applicants, so competition is fierce. Most of the ski applicants have far more than the minimum.

Prerequisites – Rock

Climbing Skills resume showing the minimum leading experience

- 15 short routes (1 – 3 pitches) requiring protection placement. Minimum 5.10c
- 15 sport climbs (fixed pro) flashed in the past year. Minimum 5.10d
- Significant red points in the past year which indicate your top climbing standard
- 15 moderate length routes (full day, multi pitch)
- 2 or more longer routes (very long/multi day)
- Any routes which require direct aid
- A total of 3 or more years of experience, preferably in a variety of areas on different rock types

Prerequisites – Alpine

Alpine Skills resume showing the minimum leading experience

- 15 moderate length, mixed alpine routes
- 5 long, or multi day alpine climbs
- 15 waterfall ice climbs of WI 4 or harder (5 of which are WI 5 or harder)

- Travel on icefields and glaciers in summer conditions
- A total of 3 or more years of experience, preferably in a variety of areas

Prerequisites – Hiking

Hiking Skills resume showing you have a minimum of:

- A description of how you have gained a good understanding of hazards related to mountain travel
- 30 day hikes, of which 10 should describe off trail travel in alpine terrain and a minimum of 700 meters elevation gain/loss.
- 21 backpacking trip nights. Describe which trips involved overnight stays in alpine terrain and advanced map and compass use for navigation.

Prerequisites – Skiing

Backcountry experience resume showing you meet or exceed the minimum leading experience

- 15 ski-tours of 1-2 days in high alpine or glaciated terrain
- 2 ski-tours of five-days or longer in remote, glaciated terrain (non-hut based)
- 5 ski-tours of three to five-days or longer in remote glaciated terrain (may be hut based)
- 5 peaks requiring mountaineering skills, climbed during ski tours
- Notable ski descents
- Relevant summer mountaineering experience
- A total of 3 or more years of experience in a variety of snow climates

Challenges Faced by TRU and the ACMG

Over the last ten years, there have been a number of challenges faced by the ACMG and TRU. Some of them were the sole responsibility of the ACMG, while others required the combined efforts of both organizations. The primary challenge for the ACMG has been the establishment and clarification of Professional and Terrain guidelines. These guidelines help both guides and clients understand the boundaries and scope of practice of the various certifications.

The Professional guidelines clearly define the expectations of professional practice for assistant and full guides. Assistant guides are considered to be in an “apprentice” role, working closely with a full guide. Assistant guides should not be running their own businesses, but should be learning the trade and training for the full guide exam. Full guides should be actively training the assistants that are working with them.

The Terrain guidelines define the specific types of terrain the various categories of guides should be working in. The difficulty comes from the terrain that might be considered common between two certification types. For example: rock climbing and alpine rock climbing, or ski mountaineering and mountaineering.

New Certifications

As the mountain guiding world has evolved, the need for other certifications has become apparent. The ACMG took the approach that including broader based activities would increase the power base of the organization. There would be fewer control issues compared to dealing with a totally different organization. Government land managers would be more willing to listen to the concerns of a larger organization. The first certification that the ACMG added was the Hiking guide. This was quickly followed by the Climbing Gym Instructor certification and eventually a Top Rope Instructor certification.

The challenges with the Hiking Guide certification included: creating buy-in from the non-certified guides who were currently practicing, and persuading land managers that this was a needed addition to the certification landscape. Initially, there was a competing certification process created by another organization, which was adopted by the National Parks. This developed into a major stumbling block for the ACMG Hiking certification.

The Climbing Gym Instructor certification evolved from a small group of instructors who perceived a need for certification of instructors at indoor climbing gyms. Although it is a very well thought out and organized curriculum, the climbing gym owners have been slow to adopt the certification.

The Top Rope Instructor certification was added two years ago. It is still undergoing some growing pains. It was targeted at the large number of summer camps that offered climbing instruction. However it is being adopted by some of the Climbing Gym instructors as a way of adding outdoor instruction to their offerings. This puts them in conflict with Assistant and Full Rock Guides.

Summary

Thompson Rivers University and the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides have enjoyed a very productive relationship. Separating the training and certification from the professional association has allowed the ACMG to focus on the needs of the membership. Having a University deliver the program adds a level of credibility to the profession more like that of nurses, doctors, lawyers and engineers. The challenges of implementing change to a national level certification have been facilitated through the diligent efforts of both the ACMG Executive and the Adventure Studies Department.