

ISTHMUS

RECREATION ♦ David Medaris

The ascent from Basecamp

Pilot program acclimates new UW students

“I was an undergrad here,” remembers Finn Ryan, “and a lot of my friends were at smaller liberal-arts colleges, and they went on trips like this. On reflection, I thought it would have been a good experience for me.” Now, as a graduate student in curriculum and instruction at UW-Madison, he is helping to introduce a similar opportunity to incoming freshmen.

A Wisconsin Hoofers veteran who helped establish the UW-Madison Nordic Ski Team during his undergrad years, Ryan has joined with fellow Hooper Nathan Williams, a web developer for University Housing, to start Wisconsin Basecamp, a five-day outdoor orientation program designed to help participants make the transition from high school to a big university.

The two started talking about the concept a couple of years ago, spurred by the success of similar programs at other schools. Participation at some colleges and universities has soared into the hundreds.

Wisconsin Basecamp got off the ground this past summer with a pilot program. Ryan and Williams worked with Hoofers, the UW’s Orientation and New Student Programs and the campus’ Adventure Learning Programs to organize two Wisconsin River canoe camping trips.

Each excursion was limited to 10 participants, who busied themselves with canoe lessons, team-building activities, sandbar camping, campfire discussions, journal-keeping and instruction in leave-no-trace ethics.

Those who signed up agreed to



Wisconsin Basecamp: Paddle canoes, make new friends.

help evaluate the program and participate in follow-up activities. They also are having their academic progress monitored by Ryan, who is studying how effectively the program helps freshmen get acclimatized to a big campus.

In addition to Ryan and Williams, Basecamp leaders included Andy Davis, a senior studying biology, political science and environmental studies, and president of the Hooper Mountaineering Club; and Emily Heim, a junior in biological aspects of conservation and geography, who has led extended canoe expeditions in Canada. Both are experienced wilderness guides and have wilderness first-aid certification.

Among the Basecamp participants was Julia Oswald, who got an email about the program during her senior year at Wauwatosa East High School, where she graduated in a class of a few hundred. Like many incoming freshmen, she had some trepidation about the transition to a campus of more than 40,000. “I needed a reason to get excited about coming here,” she says.

Basecamp was it.

The program also benefited Mathias Krueckeberg, who graduated in a class of 320 at a high school in St. Paul. “I was trying to figure out how to make 40,000 people feel not so large,” he remembers. After five days of Basecamp, he says, he realized, “Okay, I have the ability to meet people and not be awkward.”

This epiphany may have been the result of a strategy employed by the trip’s leaders, Davis notes: “We didn’t let people canoe with the same person more than once.” Learning to work with each new paddling partner appears to have helped break the ice.

“I bonded with people really quickly,” says Oswald. That paid big dividends. Arriving on campus about a month after Basecamp, she kept encountering the familiar faces of other Basecampers.

“It was nice to have new friends here already,” she says.

Since the end of Basecamp, both Krueckeberg and Oswald have signed on with the Hooper Moun-

taineering Club, and both have considered volunteering as trip leaders a few years from now, assuming the program continues and grows.

Heim sees great potential in the program, noting that the participants she has encountered since Basecamp “seem more comfortable on campus.”

This may be ascribed, at least in part, to the self-selecting nature of opening an email, recognizing an opportunity and taking advantage of it. “It kind of took a person who was kind of motivated,” Krueckeberg acknowledges. Still, “I really think this program could get a lot bigger.”

It already is. Next summer, Ryan and Williams say, they plan to offer nine Basecamp trips. “I don’t think we can call the program a success until it expands,” Ryan notes.

“It takes a lot of effort,” he says. “We have a lot of supporters on campus, but we need funding.”

Still, the concept’s adaptability to different settings, activities and campus populations — such as students transferring from other campuses, or in specific academic disciplines — is such that Ryan is motivated by its potential. “The effect that this could have is huge,” he contends.

“It was amazing how fast a community was born,” Ryan observes of this summer’s two pilot trips. “That’s what [the new students] needed, so they could say, ‘I’m really excited about coming to school.’ The idea of college, of ‘I can do this — I can meet new people and share the experience.’ That’s validated.” ♦

DMEDARIS@ISTHMUS.COM