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MAGAZINE

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# Beyond Surveys

*Exploring Alternative Ways to Measure Camp's Benefits*

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Photographer: Bryce Hunt  
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## Camp is a place where children can laugh, run, climb, swim, dance . . . and sit at desks taking tests?

To determine the impact of your camp program, you too may be considering subjecting your campers to school-like testing conditions. Fortunately, there are alternative methods of data collection — methods that are less stuffy, more practical, equally as effective, and sometimes even fun.

So if you would like to measure the benefits of your program without using written surveys or tests — FEAR NOT! Here are a few suggestions for alternative ways to measure camp's benefit based on lessons learned by creative camps and youth development agencies.

### Camper Passports

Attending camp is an extremely interactive experience. Often there are many new adventures upon which campers will embark for the first time. So why not give them a *passport* to capture their achievements in a fun and interactive way?

Develop a simple paper passport with an individual page dedicated to each of your core program areas. Supply every camper with a passport at the beginning of your camp session. Then stamp the corresponding passport page every time a camper successfully demonstrates competency in a particular area.

Of course, you will have to determine what *competency* in each area looks like. Perhaps to earn a stamp in "Nature," campers have to name eight out of ten trees that grow locally. Or, to earn a stamp in "Outdoor Adventure," campers have to conquer the high ropes course. Perhaps you will have different criteria for your campers depending upon their age or how many summers they've attended your camp. Those decisions are up to you.

But once you make them, you can be assured that you will be gathering concrete data on every camper's progress — while giving them a keepsake of their success. And if you maintain a log in each area of who has had their passports stamped, you will also have a sense of your overall programmatic success.

### Distribution of Beads

Distributing beads to campers who demonstrate competency in certain areas is another way to capture information on your campers' success — while giving them a concrete reward they can keep and even display. In this instance, different color beads could represent achievement in each of your core areas. Or bead colors could indicate a certain level of achievement (i.e., red for beginner, gold for advanced).

Of course, a child sitting at a desk taking a test is not exactly the picture of camp fun. But with increasing pressure to evaluate your programs, this scenario may seem inevitable. In fact, written surveys are probably the most frequently turned to method of collecting data on programmatic success.

Of course, you don't need to use beads. You can opt for whatever small token you deem appropriate and in keeping with your camp's culture. Again, as was the case with the passport example, you should make the specific decisions about what represents camper competency in each of the designated areas. Moreover, you should use a log to track what beads were distributed to whom. This information can later be compiled to get a sense of the overall achievement of your entire camp population.

### Interactive Game Shows

Sometimes, in order to get information about what your campers have learned, you have to ask questions. That does not mean it has to be done in a stuffy #2 pencil-manner. In fact, putting on an interactive game show can be a great way to assess your campers' knowledge, while also building camp community and morale.

Think about the sort of questions you would be tempted to include on a test, and then ask them in a game show-style format. If you're looking for individual results, you can have your campers keep track of their answers and turn in a "score sheet" at the end of each round. Ultimately, you will be collecting answer sheets not unlike those used on tests, but without all of the anxiety.

Or, if overall group performance is what you're after, you can give your campers blue and red poker chips. Let the blue chips represent "true" and the red chips represent "false." Then ask a series of true/false questions. Designate a basket for each question, and ask the campers to put the chip they believe represents the correct answer into the corresponding question's basket. At the end, you can count up the number of correct chips in each basket to see how well the group did.

In both of these examples, you will have the opportunity to recognize your campers' success — perhaps even reward those with the highest scores. You may also be afforded the opportunity to re-teach certain concepts, if that seems to be necessary. In any case, you can gather your campers together for a fun activity that won't even feel like a test — and still get the valuable information you need to measure their learning.

### Writing Letters

It's always important to get testimonials from your campers. These in-depth insights can complement and often help explain the numbers-oriented data yielded by surveys and tests, as well as all of the aforementioned data-collection methods.



Getting campers to convey this information verbally through interviews or focus groups can be time-consuming and requires someone to record what they say. A simpler, yet very effective way to collect the information you want is to have campers write a letter to someone (i.e., a prospective camper or the camp director). This allows for the sharing of such details in a child-friendly format.

Be sure to guide your campers in their writing. Instruct them to convey what they learned during the session or how they have changed because of camp. That way you can ensure that they are sharing outcome-related information. You might even consider starting sentences that they have to complete like, "At camp, the most important thing that I learned that I didn't know before was: \_\_\_\_\_."

### Surveys, Surveys, Surveys

Although there may be drawbacks to administering surveys during your camp session, there are definite benefits to having survey data. Asking parents to complete a survey after some time has passed since their children returned home from camp is a great way to determine whether your program had any lasting impact. They can assess through observation whether their children's attitudes and behaviors have improved since attending camp. Similarly, if your camp has a partnership with a school or after-school program, you could survey staff members at affiliated sites to determine if they have observed any change in your campers.

Lastly, administering a survey to your campers can be very worthwhile. Yet, developing a survey that can be easily understood and completed by children can be quite challenging. So when creating your own camper survey, be mindful of the W.E.L.L. elements: **W**ord-choice, **E**nvironment, **L**ay-out, and **L**ength.

- **Word-Choice:** If the questions included on the survey confuse your campers, you will not get the valid data you are seeking. Be sure to use age-appropriate words. Furthermore, consider using pop-culture terminology to make the survey questions more conversational and therefore less intimidating.
- **Environment:** Try to create a physical environment to administer your surveys that does not feel sterile and institutional. Basically, use a space that is as camp-like as possible. And don't

## 2003 America's Camp CAMPER Survey

Thanks for taking this survey! Your answers will help America's Camp be the best it can be. ☺ And don't worry — there are no wrong answers.

Please circle the statement that best matches how YOU feel.

|   |               |            |             |               |
|---|---------------|------------|-------------|---------------|
| The <b>Daily Activities</b> were ...            | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Trips Out of Camp</b> were ...           | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Special Guests</b> were ...              | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Campers in My Bunk</b> were ...          | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Counselors in My Bunk</b> were ...       | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Other Staff Members at Camp</b> were ... | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| <b>Buddy Central</b> was ...                    | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| My <b>Cabin/Sleeping Area</b> was ...           | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |
| The <b>Food</b> was ...                         | Not Good<br>★ | Okay<br>★★ | Good<br>★★★ | Great<br>★★★★ |

Please let us know which of these activities we should do again.

|                         |                                      |  |                                   |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Opening Campfire        | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| Harry Potter Games      | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| Nature Hike             | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| Norman Rockwell Museum  | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| Basketball Hall of Fame | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| American Idol           | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| College Day             | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |
| MTV Night               | <input type="checkbox"/> Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Do It Again | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure |

Please help us plan the overall schedule.

How much time do you want to spend in regular activities?  More  Less  Same

How many field trips do you want to take?  More  Less  Same

How much rest time in the bunk do you want?  More  Less  Same

Please circle the statement that best matches how YOU feel.

|  |               |                    |                  |
|--|---------------|--------------------|------------------|
| At America's Camp, I felt very supported by the staff.     | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I tried things I'd never tried before.  | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I learned new things.                   | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I had fun.                              | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I made new friends.                     | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I felt comfortable sharing my feelings. | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| At America's Camp, I felt like I belonged.                 | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| I would like to come back to America's Camp.               | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |
| I would recommend America's Camp to a friend.              | Not True<br>★ | Sort of True<br>★★ | Very True<br>★★★ |

What was your favorite part of camp? \_\_\_\_\_

What would you change about camp? \_\_\_\_\_

What could America's Camp do to improve your experience? \_\_\_\_\_

In the space below, please describe what America's Camp means to you.

What was your BUNK NUMBER? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you ever visit Buddy Central?  Yes  No

Was this your first summer at America's Camp?  Yes  No

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!



forget, environment is affected by tone, so set a positive one. Make sure your campers understand that you are surveying them to learn what they like about camp and what might improve the experience for them. Bottom line — if they feel comfortable in their environment, they will likely feel comfortable answering your questions.

- **Layout:** If a survey looks unappealing, your campers will be turned-off by it before they even start answering the questions. Use child-friendly fonts; make sure it's clear where the respondents should supply their answers; and pay particular attention to spacing.
- **Length:** Since a multi-page survey can intimidate even adults, try to keep your camper survey to one page (front-and-back, if necessary). Additionally, make sure it doesn't take longer than ten-to-fifteen minutes to complete. Otherwise, you will likely lose your campers' attention and decrease the likelihood that they will have thought through every answer.

When deciding on which questions to include, always ask yourself what the results will tell you once the data is compiled. Aim to include only those questions that will yield the most pertinent data. If necessary, brainstorm a list of potential questions and then weed them down accordingly.

### One Last Bit of Advice

Children attend camp for many reasons — likely none of those reasons include the opportunity to take tests. So minimize the degree to which your data collection interferes with your regular program. As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, there are many ways you can collect meaningful data as part of your daily operations. Apply the same creativity you use in program development to your data collection strategies, and you will be well on your way. ■

*Laurel Molloy provides training and technical assistance to enable nonprofits nationwide to develop and implement plans to measure their program outcomes. She has over ten years of hands-on experience working at day and resident camps and a master's in public administration from New York University. For more information or assistance developing your own data collection plan, contact the author at laurelmolloy@yahoo.com.*

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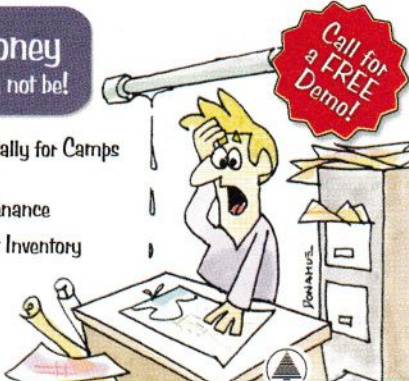
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