

# Integrating Higher Education Opportunities into Your Program





## **Forced Partnerships Don't Work**

After graduating from Rocky Mountain College and working with them for several years, along with other post-secondary institutions in Calgary, I stayed connected with many of these organizations. My positive experiences at Rocky Mountain inspired me to explore partnerships between colleges and summer camps. I saw great potential in blending outdoor learning with higher education, offering students unique experiences beyond traditional classrooms. However, aligning my passion for camp-based learning with the colleges' priorities was challenging.

Colleges with physical campuses face the constant reality of maintaining costly facilities, which can limit their openness to unconventional partnerships. It's not that these institutions are resistant to collaboration, but their missions and financial constraints sometimes steer them in other directions. For any partnership to succeed, both sides need to align their goals and strategies—everything must start with a shared mission to ensure a sustainable and meaningful collaboration.

Mission alignment is critical when organizations consider partnering because it ensures that both entities are working toward the same overarching goals, thereby maximizing their collective impact. When organizations share a common mission, they can pool resources, expertise, and networks to achieve outcomes that might be unattainable individually. This synergy not only enhances efficiency but also strengthens credibility among stakeholders who see a unified commitment to a cause. Conversely, partnering without mission alignment can lead to conflicting priorities, diluted efforts, and confusion among beneficiaries and supporters.



## **Everything Starts With Mission**

Mission mismatches between colleges and a summer camps can create significant barriers to successful partnerships.

### Location

One such mismatch arises from the physical separation of their locations. When a college and a summer camp are situated in different places, logistical challenges become prominent. This geographical distance can hinder regular communication, limit face-to-face interactions, and complicate the coordination of joint programs. The disconnect may also mean that each organization serves a different community with unique needs, making it difficult to design initiatives that are relevant and impactful for both.

### Accreditation

Another point of divergence is the college's pursuit of accreditation versus some camps emphasis on experiential learning. Colleges often focus on meeting rigorous academic standards and obtaining accreditation to validate their educational programs. In contrast, summer camps prioritize providing enriching experiences that foster personal growth, creativity, and social skills in a more informal setting. The camp's value in experiences may not align with the college's value for formal recognition.

### Target Age

The difference in target age groups further exacerbates the mismatch. Colleges typically cater to young adults aged 19-30, focusing on advanced education and career preparation. At Stillwood our core mission is ages 14-20, aiming to develop foundational skills, confidence, and early career interests. This gap means that the programs and services each organization offers are tailored to different developmental stages and needs. Attempting to merge these could result in programs that are too advanced for camp participants or too simplistic for college students, thereby failing to effectively serve either group.

### Funding

Both camps and colleges often operate under tight budget constraints, and without adequate financial resources, they cannot develop or sustain collaborative initiatives. This lack of funding can prevent the implementation of programs that require investment in materials, staffing, or facilities. Consequently, the partnership may not deliver tangible benefits to either organization, rendering the collaboration ineffective.



## Strategic Planning

The strategic planning process is an essential undertaking that all organizations should employ to set priorities, focus energy and resources, and ensure that all stakeholders are working toward common goals. For summer camps, I advocate the following process:

1. *Defining Your Primary **Mission and Values***: This foundational step involves articulating your camp's core purpose and the principles that guide its actions. The mission statement expresses why you exists and what your camp aims to achieve, while the values reflect the beliefs and ethical standards that shape its culture and decision-making.
2. *Identifying **Programs** That Fit Your Mission*: With a clear mission and set of values, the next step is to identify and develop programs that directly support and advance these objectives. This involves evaluating current programs for alignment and effectiveness, as well as exploring new initiatives that could better fulfill the mission. If you are considering integrating higher education opportunities into your camp, this is the stage

where such considerations are primarily addressed.

3. *Determining the **Facilities & Infrastructure** Needed to Support Your Programs:* After establishing which programs to pursue, it's essential to assess the physical and infrastructural requirements necessary for their successful implementation. This includes identifying the facilities, equipment, technology, and other resources needed to support program activities. Many camps start here, asking, "What buildings do we want?" They begin down this path without fully considering their mission and programs. Others stop after deciding on their programs but lack the physical infrastructure, staff, or budget to support their desired program.



While you may have come to this session to explore options for integrating higher education into your programming, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of letting your mission lead the way.

In 2019, after our board of directors completed an in-depth mission and vision process, we were ready to move into the next phase of our planning: program development. That year, I attended the CCI National Conference in Banff and participated in a session with Camp lawah, where they described their Youth Development Leadership Program (YDLP).

Up to that point—and perhaps still—it was the best example I’ve seen of a program closely aligned with its mission. I’d like to take a brief moment to describe Camp lawah’s YDLP. While it’s not necessarily a “higher education” program, it develops participants in ways similar to post-secondary education. In fact, many colleges offer comparable elements in their programming.



## **IAWAH's YDLP**

Camp IAWAH's Youth Development Leadership Programs (YDLP) guide youth on a journey toward becoming grounded in Christian values and developing leadership skills. Designed for students starting from the end of grade 8, the programs are structured into progressive stages: RISE, CREW, ROOTs, and REACH. While these stages build on each other, there are no prerequisites, allowing participants to join at any level.

- **RISE:** A 13 day summer camp experience for teens that have completed Grade 8. Campers are introduced to leadership concepts and serves as a great introduction to the CREW program.
- **CREW:** Ages 14-15. It focuses on developing a strong work ethic and teamwork skills through volunteer work in food service, housekeeping, and groundskeeping. Participants engage in team-building activities, study sessions, and a 3-day canoeing or hiking trip.
- **ROOTs:** A 4-week leadership development program for those who have completed grade 10. It offers four focus streams—Altitude (mountaineering and hiking in the Adirondack Mountains), Wild (canoeing in remote wilderness areas), River (kayaking on the Rideau and St. Lawrence Rivers), and Vélo (bike-packing on trails and backcountry roads). Participants spend time on personal and team challenges, leadership theory, and run a 5-day outreach program like a day camp to apply their skills.
- **REACH:** A 3-week program for individuals entering grade 12 or in post-secondary education. It enhances leadership skills through a cross-cultural experience in Latin America, specifically Colombia. Participants work alongside local ministries to understand service in a different cultural context, addressing issues like poverty from a Christian perspective.

What truly stands out about Camp IAWAH's Youth Development Leadership Program (YDLP) is its strong connection to mission. At every stage, participants are not only individually developed but also have opportunities to engage with the summer camp experience. According to the Hemorrhaging Faith study, summer camps and short-term missions are key to an individual's faith, spiritual development, and engagement in Christian leadership. IAWAH's program excels at bridging the needs of the camp with the development of young people for the future. After seeing this, we at Stillwood embarked on our own journey to revamp our programs.



Before we could develop our own Youth Discipleship Programs (YDP), we needed to reevaluate our mission. When I arrived at Stillwood in 2018, the mission statement was: “To serve others and to help people know God.” While this was a good mission, it allowed some to say, “I don’t need to serve because I am helping people know God,” or others to claim, “I serve, so I don’t need to be part of the Christian elements of the ministry.” Recognizing this ambiguity, we soon began working on a new mission statement.



## **Mission**

"We exist to lead people to experience transformation in Jesus."

## **Values**

- Jesus - not a value, but #1 Philippians 2:9-11
- Discipleship - Matt 28:19
- Evangelism - Mark 16:15
- Integrity - Philippians 4:8
- Excellence - Colossians 3:23

## **Targets**

- Ages 14-18 - Many people wonder why our summer camp focuses on ages 14 to 18. We believe that investing resources in this age group helps individuals become young adult leaders. These leaders then participate in our

summer camp programs to create mission-driven experiences for our campers.

- 12 Months of the Year - We are not just a summer ministry; our location is perfectly suited for year-round engagement. To fully embrace our mission throughout all seasons, we introduce our higher education program. This program serves as a stepping stone for individuals aged 14 to 18, continuing their leadership development beyond the summer months. While we offer other initiatives that make us a 12-month ministry, we will focus on the higher education role at Stillwood.



Discipleship programs are essential because they serve as a transformative platform for young adults to develop into exceptional leaders ready for the next phase of their education and life journey. Many camps already provide these programs, and enhancing them can lead to additional benefits like accreditation from colleges that recognize the value of a well-crafted curriculum. More importantly, these programs nurture personal growth, instill strong moral values, and hone leadership skills. By focusing on strengthening their discipleship programs, camps take a pivotal step toward integrating higher education opportunities, thereby enriching individual development and a camps entire program offering.

We already illustrated the fantastic Descipleship program at camp lawah. You can learn more about this program here:

- <https://iawah.com/youth-development/#crew>

## **What Other Camps are doing:**

As my most recent experience is in British Columbia, most of my examples come from that region of the world. However I do believe that these 4 very different programs illustrate what is possible when integrating Higher education into your program.

Gardom Lake - <https://www.gardomlake.ca>

Gardom Lake, located in the interior of British Columbia, offers what many consider a traditional summer camp experience. It runs summer camp programs during the summer and hosts a limited number of retreats and guest groups in the off-season. One summer, Gardom had a unique mix of summer leaders who were interested in continuing their involvement with the ministry after the season ended. These leaders were also at a point in their spiritual journeys where they were considering attending a Bible college. Gardom reached out to Rocky Mountain College in Calgary, and together they developed a program that combined elements of classroom learning and ministry experiences during the off-season between summers at the camp. Since not all attendees were interested in continuing their formal education, the goal of this program was not accreditation but personal development.

This program, named Thrive, is not run every year, and several factors contribute to its inconsistency. First and foremost, the program exists for the development of leaders who want to experience higher education at Gardom. If there are no summer leaders ready or interested in such a program, it does not run. Additionally, after the first year, Gardom discovered that the staffing and financial costs of running the program were greater than originally planned. While they have not abandoned the idea, future Thrive programs will be adjusted to address these considerations.

Green Bay Bible Camp & Youth Worker Community - <https://www.youthworker.community/coalition/about-us>

Green Bay Bible Camp offers a fantastic Discipleship program. While this program has always been top-notch, they also benefit from the influence of Sid Koop. Sid Koop, the husband of Green Bay's Executive Director, is one of the forces behind YWC. YWC specializes in youth worker development and has created a specialized two-year integrated vocational program for youth workers called The Coalition. This program differs from other camp integrations or traditional college certificate programs in that its intended target audience is individuals already working in youth ministry. One of the challenges camps face is that staff members who excel at their camp jobs

often haven't had the time to complete a degree. This program offers a way for individuals to complete accredited educational programs while continuing to work in their youth ministry.

Rocky Mountain College - <https://www.rockymountaincollege.ca/>

From 1995 until 2000, I had the pleasure of attending RMC on-site in Calgary. In 2015, RMC launched the Pathways program to ensure that high-quality Christian education programs could be completed by students anywhere in the world. RMC was so dedicated to this new mission that they ceased in-person operations at the Calgary site.

This program is not simply online education, although online courses do exist. RMC offers the ability to teach students in person at their current locations. For example, RMC is a partner with Stillwood, Gardom Lake, and the Coalition program. RMC enables local experts or brings their own professors to teach courses in person in a hybrid model that also utilizes online courses as necessary. The key here is that RMC works very hard to ensure that the mission of the partner organization is being achieved.

Sunneybrae Bible Camp - <https://www.sunnybrae.ca/MillarCollegeoftheBible>

Sunneybrae's model is, once again, completely different from those of Gardom, Green Bay, or us at Stillwood. Born more out of missional alignment than any other force, this model has created a Bible college campus onsite at the camp. Established in 2012, from September until April, Sunneybrae transforms into a campus for Millar College of the Bible. Millar College has three campuses, one of which is Sunneybrae, with 100 students attending college onsite at the camp. The college is fully integrated into the camp; if there are guest groups, the students might be used to staff the groups' needs. More importantly, the college saw the location, facilities, and mission of Sunneybrae as a perfect partnership opportunity, allowing both ministries and missions to flourish together in ways stronger than if they were alone.



## **YDP**

Before we discuss how Stillwood integrates post-secondary education, I want to emphasize that our mission is paramount. Our post-secondary program, called Tereo, would have no reason to exist outside of our mission. There are tons of fantastic post-secondary programs out there. So why did we feel the need to create another one? Because it fills a missional need.

Firstly, I want to mention our Youth Discipleship Program. After examining Camp lawah's program, we decided to fully commit to creating a new discipleship program. In the past, it was a two-phase program: Phase 1 involved work crew and service elements, and Phase 2 focused on leadership development intended to create future cabin leaders. However, there were a few problems with that model—it did not align with our new mission as well as it should.

For example, we “needed” to ensure that our work crew program was full to have enough people to handle



dishes and cleaning during summer camp. We also “needed” to maintain a strong supply of future cabin leaders, and finding summer volunteers is hard. As a result, our programs were focused on what Stillwood needed, rather than on individual development.

The new programs are intended to develop each person as an individual. We believe that meeting teenagers where they are will produce a much more well-rounded person in the end. Our mission is not cleaning dishes—it is transforming lives. Therefore, our new program was broken into three phases:

1. Explore – Meant as a bridge from traditional summer camp to engaging in more spiritual and personal development.
2. Engage – A three-week program that focuses on classroom teaching and leadership development.
3. Empower – A three-week program where an individual decides on a focus at camp (not just cabin leader) and learns more about that specific area.

We discussed having a 4th program, however it was decided that 4th level would be better suited as a post secondary program. After the Empower program the kids are now young adults and ready for a higher level of educational engagement. This started us to consider the program that we now call Tereo.

### **Tereo @ Stillwood**

The Tereo College Program is a unique, tuition-free educational initiative accredited by Rocky Mountain College. Designed as a natural extension of our Youth Development Program (YDP), Tereo aims to nurture the growth of young adults by providing them with opportunities for spiritual and personal development while actively engaging in work within Stillwood.

- **Tuition-Free Education:** Tereo offers a blend of online and in-person classes at no cost, including free room and board. This makes Bible college education accessible without the financial burden typically associated with an additional year of study.
- **Integrated Ministry Work:** Participants work as seasonal staff during our busiest months—September to October and April to June—helping to host the 30,000 to 50,000 guests we welcome annually. This hands-on

experience allows students to apply their learning in real-world settings while contributing to our year-round ministry.

- **Flexible Participation:** We run the Tereo program based on interest and can accommodate between 5 to 20 students, depending on staffing needs. This flexibility ensures we can tailor the program to individual needs, whether students wish to pursue a one-year certificate, continue toward a four-year Bachelor's degree, or audit classes as local community members.
- **Personalized Growth:** Committed to the spiritual and personal development of each participant, Tereo does not rely on traditional recruitment methods or fixed partnerships with other institutions. This allows us to focus on the unique journey of every student.

Many professionals express regret over missing the opportunity to attend Bible college due to time and financial constraints. Tereo addresses this by offering accredited education in exchange for service, integrating spiritual growth with practical ministry experience. It's more than just a program; it's a community dedicated to fostering lifelong growth and making a lasting impact.

### **Your Camps Education opportunities:**

Summer camps have a unique position to influence and enrich the lives of young adults by integrating elements of higher education into their programs. By leveraging existing resources, forging partnerships, and staying true to your mission, you can provide impactful educational experiences that extend beyond the summer months. Here are some opportunities to consider:

#### **1. Start with Your Summer Discipleship Programs**

- **Invite Guest Lecturers:** Enhance your discipleship programs by bringing in guest lecturers. Reach out to local Bible colleges to engage professors or theology experts who can provide deeper insights and stimulate thoughtful discussions among your campers.
- **Collaborate with Educational Institutions:** Form partnerships with nearby colleges to incorporate academic elements into your programs. This collaboration can offer campers a taste of higher education within the supportive environment of your camp.

#### **2. Utilize Your Resources All Year Round**

- **Think Beyond Summer:** Explore ways to use your facilities and resources throughout the entire year. While establishing a full-scale college on-site might not be feasible, you can still offer educational opportunities during the off-season.
- **Facilitate Online Courses:** Organize groups of your summer volunteers to take online college courses together in the off-season. This collective learning experience can strengthen community bonds and promote continued personal growth.
- **Organize Off-Season Missions Trips:** Many camps engage in missions trips during the off-season, both locally and abroad. These trips can combine service with learning opportunities, allowing participants to apply their faith in real-world contexts while gaining valuable life experiences.

### **3. Maximize Your Incredible Resources**

- **Leverage Your Facilities:** Camp facilities, whether expansive or modest, offer unique environments for learning and fellowship. Even a simple tent site provides a dedicated space for young adults to share and deepen their understanding of Christ.
- **Offer a Change of Scenery for Colleges:** Colleges are often confined to traditional classroom settings. By partnering with them, you can provide a refreshing alternative venue for retreats, workshops, or experiential learning programs in a natural setting.
- **Seek Partnerships to Enhance Offerings:** Reach out to educational institutions or church organizations to utilize your resources fully. These partnerships can lead to shared programs that benefit both your camp and the partnering organization.

### **4. Piggyback on Existing Programs**

- **Collaborate with Training Initiatives:** Programs like YWC's "The Coalition" offer opportunities to train your existing staff. Participating in such initiatives can elevate the skills of your team without the need to develop new programs from scratch.
- **Share Educational Programs:** For example Stillwood has offered to extend the "Tereo" program to other camps, with the understanding that these students will return to their home camps enriched and ready to contribute.

### **5. Everything Starts with Your Mission**

- **Clarify and Embrace Your Mission:** A clear and well-defined mission is the foundation of any successful program.

- **Align Programs with Your Mission:** Before introducing new initiatives, ensure they support and enhance your mission. Programs that are mission-driven are more likely to thrive and have a lasting impact on your campers and staff.

By focusing on these strategies, your summer camp can become a hub for spiritual growth and educational development. Integrating higher education elements doesn't require a complete overhaul of your existing programs. Instead, it involves thoughtful enhancements and partnerships that leverage your strengths and resources. Embrace the incredible potential of your camp to make a lasting difference in the lives of young adults by offering experiences that nurture both their faith and their intellectual growth.