



## The Link between Sense of Community and Camp Staff Retention

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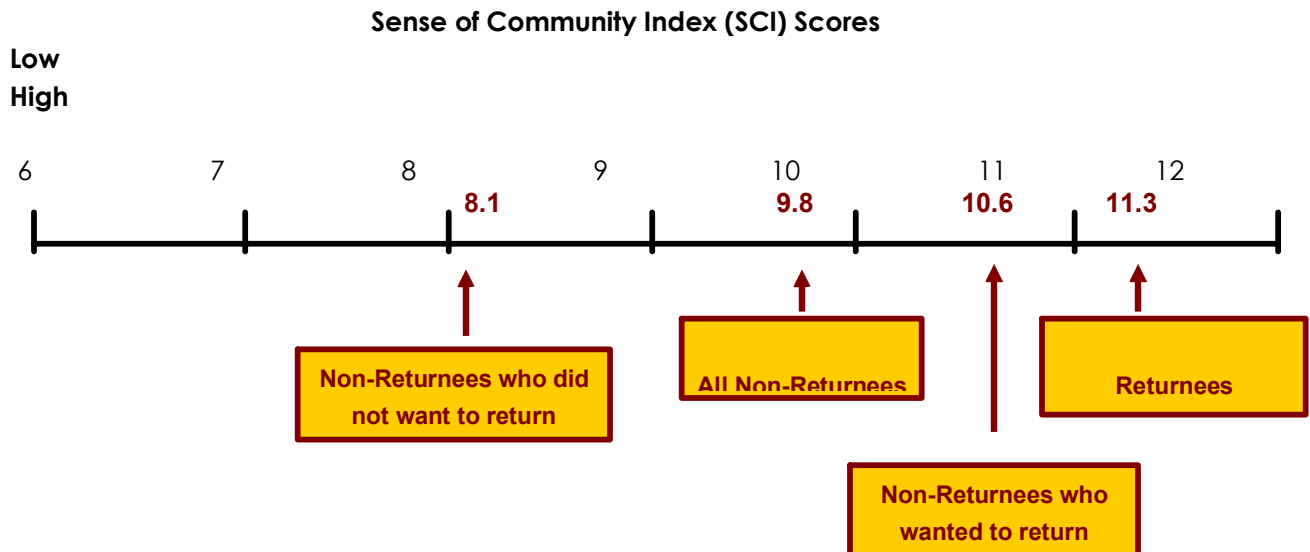
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### Key Concept

This study looked at staff retention from the perspective of *Sense of Community*, which is defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Over 950 summer camp staff members (both returning and non-returning staff) from 46 different camps completed the Sense of Community Index (SCI) survey that measured each person’s sense of community level toward his/her camp.

### Key Findings

- Staff “returnees” had significantly higher *Sense of Community* scores than “non-returnees” despite the fact that 66% of “non-returnees” indicated that they wanted to return to camp but could not.
- The “non-returnees” who indicated that they wanted to return (but couldn't) had significantly higher SCI scores than the “non-returnees” who did not want to return.
- The SCI scores for “returnees” were significantly higher than “non-returnees.” This finding suggested that some level of *Sense of Community* exists at which a staff member will “find a way” to return to camp despite having a reason (or reasons) not to.



## How to Use

This study suggests that camps that build higher senses of community among its staff members are likely to improve their year-to-year staff retention. The following suggestions can help build sense of community at summer camps in 1) Membership; 2) Influence; 3) Fulfillment of needs and 4) Shared Emotional Connection.

### Membership

- Communicate and develop the camp's values
- Bring returning staff in a day in advance to "catch up" before new staff members arrive
- Identify those who might be left out (i.e. international staff, new staff) and make an extra effort to help them feel like they belong
- Explain your camp's symbols and traditions early on to new staff
- Create new traditions that newer staff members are a part of
- Reinforce that it is everyone's responsibility to make sure everyone else feels like they belong, and bring items related to inclusiveness into the performance evaluations
- Address behaviors that are exclusive immediately and in a positive way... the offenders may not realize what they are doing

### Influence

- Provide appropriate opportunities for staff to be creative and autonomous
- Create leadership roles and actions
- Ask for staff members' opinions and listen to them
- Constantly remind staff of the difference they are making in the lives of children (especially the staff who might not realize it... kitchen, maintenance, etc...)
- Read positive letters from parents and kids and encourage staff members to do the same.
- Ask a staff member for help
- Empower senior staff members, but ensure they are properly trained

### Fulfillment of Needs

- Ask staff what they want to get out of their camp experience and help them achieve these goals
- Identify and manage potentially unmet needs (i.e. privacy, adult social interaction, informal time with leaders)
- Have comfortable places where staff can socialize

- Identify staff members who might not have anything to do over session breaks and personally ask a camp staff member to “take them in”

#### Shared Emotional Connection

- Make sure staff training has opportunities to create “shared history” experiences
- Give plenty of opportunities for staff to identify things they have in common
- Publicly recognize staff members’ positive behaviors but don’t publicly criticize their negative behaviors
- Try to take advantages of crises to bring people together
- Provide opportunities for staff members to spend time together (but not just in cliques)
- Reinforce and celebrate “victories” (positive experiences)
- Process experiences on a regular basis (i.e. after sessions, at halfway points, etc.)
- Bring meaningful closure to the summer (videos, slide shows, ceremonies, awards, staff book)

#### **Source**

McCole, D. (2006). *Sense of community among summer camp staff members*. Paper presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial Research Symposium for the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Conference, Bradford Woods, IN.