

6-1-2019

## Creating Group Norms by Using Full Value Commitments in Experiential Education Programming

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### Recommended Citation

Torretta, A., & VanderWay, S. (2019). Creating Group Norms by Using Full Value Commitments in Experiential Education Programming. *Journal of Extension*, 57(3). Retrieved from <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol57/iss3/1>

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## **Creating Group Norms by Using Full Value Commitments in Experiential Education Programming**

### **Abstract**

The Full Value Commitment is an essential tool for facilitators that defines how members of a group of adults or youths operate while moving toward the group's goals. This article outlines what goes into establishing a Full Value Commitment and provides an overview of samples that are easily replicated. Through establishing group members' verbal and/or written commitments to learning and safety at the beginning of their time in a learning environment, Extension professionals can promote the occurrence of social and emotional learning alongside citizenship and leadership skill building.

**Keywords:** [Full Value Contract](#), [adventure](#), [boundaries](#), [leadership](#), [social and emotional learning](#)

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Experiential education programming, which includes cooperative games and team-building initiatives, is a popular delivery mode used by Cooperative Extension System professionals who teach leadership and other life skills (Le, 2014; Penrose & Montgomery, 2002; Ripberger, 2008; Torretta, 2004). This programming model motivates communities of learners to achieve outstanding progress personally, academically, and socially when focused reflection and debriefing round out the experience (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). But successfully preparing group members for the learning process takes some forethought. A helpful tool facilitators can use to set the groundwork for the learning process is the Full Value Commitment (FVC). The FVC defines how members of a group of adults or youths operate while moving toward the group's goals. It is a mechanism for asking each person to show up both physically and mentally, pay attention, speak the truth, and be open to the group's outcomes during the time together (Schoel et al., 1988). The FVC supersedes the Full Value Contract originally developed and implemented by the founders of Project Adventure, Inc., in the 1970s. (Project Adventure is recognized as the leader in adventure-based experiential education whose mission is to provide leadership in the expansion of adventure-based experiential programming.) The word *commitment* in the term "Full Value Commitment" emphasizes voluntary buy-in more than the word *contract* (as was used in the name of the original tool).

### **What Is Included in an FVC?**

Being present (being on time and paying attention), giving and receiving feedback, refraining from interrupting,

and encouraging the spirit of forgiveness are some common group values established in an FVC. Although each group creates its own commitment values, some basic values should be in every FVC. All contracts have two nonnegotiable points in them:

- "We agree to be physically and emotionally safe."
- "We agree to practice 'challenge by choice.'"

## Physical Safety

Safety is a bedrock of programming, no matter the participants' ages or the setting. Horseplay and other harmful distractions can create an unsafe environment. A facilitator may allow the group to brainstorm first to allow them to bring up physical safety on their own. If they do not, this precept should be added to the FVC. Ensuring physical safety also includes designating any out-of-bounds areas, such as a waterfront, a parking lot, a roadway, or so forth.

## Emotional Safety

Participants are probably not going to step into an environment they suspect is physically hostile or emotionally threatening. If people do not feel safe, they will not trust. The facilitator is an important force in guiding the group to embrace an environment of trust and respect. Group members play a critical role in supporting one another's sense of well-being by upholding the group's own rules regarding unacceptable behaviors such as teasing, put-downs, and other forms of jokes at others' expense (VanderWey, Wallace, & Hansen, 2014).

## Challenge by Choice

Rohnke (1989) coined the phrase "challenge by choice," which acknowledges an individual's right to choose the challenge to try something outside his or her comfort zone but to be respected by the facilitator and peers if ultimately deciding not to follow through. Facilitators must recognize that the attempt is more significant than the performance results. The chance to try a challenge in a supportive, caring atmosphere while having the option to back out if self-doubt becomes too strong is an important factor for growth.

## Examples of FVCs

Effective educators know that the creation of an FVC should be as engaging as the program lessons themselves. Metaphors and symbolism are the bedrock of understanding and adopting an FVC with groups. Because creating an FVC is the foundation on which the group builds skills, this activity should not be rushed by the facilitator. Each FVC must fit the group for which it is created. A few examples of types of FVCs are described in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Full Value Commitment (FVC) Types

Example	Author and year	FVC type	Description
A	Hansen, 2014	Simple FVC	Sometimes simple is best. A facilitator may choose to lead a discussion at the beginning of the program and simply call for the group members to verbally agree to key elements. Hansen has suggested the following key elements of the

## FVC:

Work together.

Be safe, emotionally and physically.

Give and receive honest feedback/listen.

Grow.

Have FUN!

B	Wallace, White, Deen, & Jensen, 2017	The Body	The Body is an activity adapted from Project Adventure (1994) and Kreidler and Furlong's (1995) Peaceable Being. Using this contract, group members trace a member on a large piece of paper that symbolizes the group. Inside the Body, desirable traits, such as being respectful or caring, are written or drawn. Outside the Body, less desirable traits to be avoided, such as yelling out or talking over others, are written or drawn. The Body can be posted nearby where activities are occurring as a visual reminder for the group.
C	VanderWey, Wallace, & Hansen, 2014	Five Finger Agreement	The fingers of the hand can symbolize an ideal for making the group a respectful atmosphere for its members. The thumb represents individual goals (try hard/do your best); the index finger represents responsibility; the middle finger represents support/no discounting other people's feelings or experiences (put-ups, not put-downs); the ring finger represents commitment to group (support and feedback); and the pinky finger represents safety/appropriate risk (VanderWey et al., 2014). This contract is portable, as the facilitator can hold up his or her hand at any time as a reminder.
D	Frank, 2013	Hands All Around	Groups using this contract trace members' hands in a border around a large poster board. The group members then brainstorm words that describe how they want to be treated, how to treat one another, safety norms, etc. The group then selects about 10 that are most important to the entire group, and they are printed inside the border. The facilitator can refer back to the poster that the group had a "hand" in making.

## FVC Use in Extension

Though the different types of FVCs identified in Table 1 can be adapted to various applications, some descriptions of their previous uses can provide insight for their potential functions. Example A has proved effective in use with military teen adventure camps or similar group-interaction scenarios where group members do not know each other (Hansen, 2014). Example B has been used in training adult volunteers, staff, and faculty on identifying and unlearning biases and prejudices regarding LGBTQ communities (Wallace et al., 2017). Example C has been used for training adult facilitators on challenge courses as well as for training youth groups using the courses (VanderWey et al., 2014). Example D is an FVC that has been used in schools (Frank, 2013). In these various applications, the FVC has established a foundation for cooperative involvement and respect for individual needs in a safe space that has allowed participants to more fully apply themselves to the activity or program at hand. This foundation has resulted in improved self-efficacy experienced during the learning process.

## Conclusion

The FVC is an important group-created declaration of working rules or principles that set strong expectations for

behavior in a group educational setting. A facilitator can use the FVC to build a community where each individual is valued and supported so that maximum learning can take place. These values must be discussed and agreed on by the group so that the rules are coming not from the leaders in charge but from the group's members. Schoel et al. (1988) called this idea the essential "law" of adventure-based counseling that is built on value for each person and for the group as a whole. Because the FVC emphasizes the boundaries of a physical and emotional safe space, we recommend that a facilitator initiate the discovery process whereby the group creates its own commitment to rules for the group.

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