

Knowing Something About Leisure: Help or Hindrance?

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Jeanne and Sprenet folks

Can any of you provide me with, or inform me about, any research or documentation (or even written policies and standards) that indicates how having a degree in Recreation gives one more credentials and skills in managing a large city recreation center—as opposed to someone who does not have a degree, or have a degree in our field? Are there any research or practice articles out there that address this issue?

The director of a large city park and recreation department has asked me to provide him with this research, documentation, or information. Their system is trying to require a degree in Recreation, or a closely allied field, as a requirement for anyone applying for the job of Recreation Center Director. They are in the process of trying to improve the professionalism of their staff. Some current department employees are claiming that this requirement is discriminatory, and are trying to force the director to remove this requirement for a degree in Recreation or an allied field.

Can any of you point me in the right direction on finding this information?

Thanks. (Leo McAvoy, posting to SPRENET, the Society for Parks and Recreation Educators listserv, September 7, 1999)

The author of this posting poses a rather interesting question, one that certainly has implications for education, practice, and professionalization of the field. There are at least two distinct, but related issues apparent in this posting. First, what unique qualifications does a recreation graduate have that someone without the degree does not? Second, the apparent lack of “research or documentation” that addresses the first issue. The purpose of this essay is to examine both of these issues; pointing out some of the discrepancies between our beliefs and our actions, the broader implications of these discrepancies for education, practice, and professionalization, and recommendations for addressing these broader implications.

Advocates of leisure services in North America (most notably in the U.S.) have attempted to move the field toward professional status. While professional activities certainly are occurring elsewhere, this essay will primarily focus on the National Recreation and Park Association’s accreditation and certification programs and their effect on public recreation. A definitive characteristic of a profession is a unique knowledge base that distinguishes “professionals” from “nonprofessionals;” a knowledge base that is relayed

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through formal education and training. An easy, but perhaps trite, response to the question “what is unique about what you do (or why or how)?;” is “we know something about leisure!” Leisure has been identified as a part of the philosophical underpinnings of the leisure services field for quite some time and the connection between leisure and leisure services has been taught, debated, and discussed. The controversial essay by Burdige (1985) regarding the eventual split between leisure studies and parks and recreation services, for example, invoked several responses in support of the connection between the two. Despite these and other attempts, the connection between the two remains unclear. If we can accept that knowing something about leisure may be the unique contribution to the body of knowledge, skills, and abilities required of practitioners, what is it about leisure we presume to know? And how does it contribute in a unique way to what, why, or how we do what we do?

Two activities that promote and connote professional status are the accreditation of academic degree programs and the certification of individual practitioners. To answer the question “what does a recreation graduate know about leisure?” an examination of the National Recreation and Park Association’s (NRPA) accreditation standards for academic degree programs may provide a useful start. These standards were developed with input from both practitioners and academicians and are widely held to represent the knowledge base of the field. The accreditation standards require that academic programs provide an understanding (“in respect to professional performance”) of the conceptual foundations of play, recreation, and leisure for all populations and settings; the psychological, sociological, and physiological significance of play, recreation, and leisure from an historical perspective of all populations and settings; the technological, economic, and political significance of play, recreation, and leisure in contemporary society, and; the significance of play, recreation, and leisure throughout the life cycle relative to the individual’s attitudes, values, behaviors, and use of resources (Accreditation Standards, 1999, p. 13).

To answer the question how does knowledge translate into practice, an examination of the content outline for the Certified Leisure Professional (CLP) examination is a useful starting point. The *Official Study Guide for the Certified Leisure Professional Examination* (1997) states that the content of the examination is “job related and intended to test the minimal knowledge, skills, and abilities required of entry-level leisure professionals” (p. 15). According to Caneday (1996), the current accreditation standards support the linkage of certification to the knowledge base and “it should be expected that students graduating from academic programs designed to prepare students for careers in recreation, park and leisure studies should achieve the outcomes intended in these criteria” (p. 2). While the expectation may be valid, the content of the certification examination does not reflect such a linkage. Of the 125 content items identified in the *Study Guide*, only a handful could be construed as having even indirect relationships to the “leisure knowledge” specified in the accreditation standards. Thus, the preponder-

ance of content knowledge, skills, and abilities that comprise the knowledge base of the field, as reflected in the certification examination, is unrelated to leisure.

However, this is only one of several discrepancies between “what we know” and “how it effects what, why, and how we do what we do” as reflected in the professional activities of accreditation and certification. Another problem with the link (or lack thereof) is that a degree in recreation from an accredited institution (or even a degree in recreation) is not required to be eligible to take the CLP examination. The apparent assumption is that five years of full-time experience and a bachelor’s degree (with any major other than recreation) provides the practitioner with what they need to know in order to pass the examination and thus distinguish themselves from “non-professionals.” Given that the examination does not assess knowledge of leisure, this may well be the case and as such perhaps the education requirement should be foregone altogether. In any case, the benefit of leisure knowledge gained from completing an accredited degree program becomes a moot point. In addition, in many instances a CLP designation is not required for employment and furthermore, despite the position of the recreation director cited at the beginning of this essay, a degree in recreation is oftentimes not required for employment in the field. Finally, in order to be a valid gatekeeping mechanism into the field, the questions on a certification examination must reflect what that person will be expected to do, and the knowledge and skills specifically required to perform those tasks. Creating reliable and valid questions that assess the influence of knowing something about leisure on an individual’s ability to do a job effectively and efficiently is at best a difficult task. Furthermore, knowing something about leisure is unlikely to be uncovered in any analysis of job tasks. In virtually every study asking practitioners to rate or rank identified knowledge, skills, and abilities in terms of importance to their jobs, knowledge of leisure comes out at or near the bottom.

In order to overcome these discrepancies, some logical recommendations come to mind: (a) require a degree from an NRPA accredited institution to be eligible to take the certification examination; (b) demonstrate that the leisure knowledge required to provide leisure services effectively and efficiently can only be gained through formal, advanced education, and; (c) figure out a way to assess leisure knowledge on the certification examination. Accomplishing these recommendations requires a much better understanding of how knowledge of leisure *does* translate into, or connect with, practice because clearly it isn’t through an analysis of job tasks. These recommendations are only plausible, however, if we accept the notion that knowledge of leisure is what separates professionals uniquely qualified to provide programs, facilities, and services from nonprofessionals. In this scenario though, a troubling consequence emerges, namely that knowledge of leisure becomes privileged information. As a result, members of the public who do not have the benefit of this expertise must come to rely on professionals for services or at the very least recognize the unique contribution that professionals

make. We must ask ourselves: Is this likely to happen? And is this what we really want? My own feelings in response to these questions are “no” and “no.”

So what are we to do? Addressing one problem creates others. When we attempt to resolve the inconsistencies between accreditation and certification for the purpose of demonstrating a need for a recreation degree, we create a privileged class of professionals. On the other hand, if we admit that anyone can be a leisure services practitioner with a little experience and on-the-job training, why do we need recreation degree programs at all? It seems to me, at the root of this conundrum is the narrow scope of leisure and leisure services that has been adopted and even promoted in our research, practice, and education. The search for a connection between leisure and practice is narrowly focused, addressing the instrumental outcomes associated with recreation participation, facilitating these outcomes through managerial inputs (see Driver and Bruns, 1999), and ways of filling the free time of our participants with constructive (rather than destructive) activities.

Not only do we need to address our lack of understanding of how (or if) knowing something about leisure affects practice, but we need to address how our current perspective actually limits what we understand leisure to be and thus its connection to practice. For years my students have been telling me that leisure, to them, is relaxation, disengagement, “no worries.” The Benefits Approach to Leisure (developed and promoted primarily within public sector recreation) touts the positive, recuperative benefits of recreation engagement. In other words, when you’re ailing, come to us and we can fix you up. But the problem with this approach is that it is destined to be reactive, a commentary of *what is* rather than what *could be* and conserving of the status quo. Several authors have recently called into question the conserving role that capitalism and inquiry dominated by instrumental rationality plays in understanding and defining leisure and thus the role of leisure services (Hemingway, 1999; Mullet, 1988; Stormann, 1993; Sylvester, 1995). Stormann argued that the more “professionalized” the field becomes, the more the participants’ role will be reduced to mere consumption of predetermined programs, products, and services (a situation of disempowerment for individual participants). Sylvester pointed out that “The relevance of leisure is not exhausted as an instrument for fixing the problems of living or stoking the economy. Leisure is equally, if not more, relevant as an opportunity to live life as fully and meaningfully as the limits and potential of human beings allow” (p. 130).

From a critical perspective, the question becomes how does knowing something about leisure aid us in facilitating developmental and emancipatory action (see Hemingway, 1996, 1999)? Within a framework of a critical perspective, I believe parks and recreation practitioners will be needed to provide organized recreation programs and services and to facilitate stewardship of park resources, but toward a broader end than achievement of instrumental outcomes. This perspective requires a reorientation in research, practice and education; a questioning of how our current actions in each of

these three areas facilitate the development of human potential or reinforce existing power structures and barriers to such action. A failure to do so will leave us with "giving the people what they want" (e.g., a bus trip to the casino) or "giving society what it demands" (e.g., an end to youth violence) without any thought to expanding the meaning and value of leisure beyond its instrumental outcomes. As I come to the end of my allotted space, I would like to say that I believe a recreation degree does matter, but not for the specific job skills that are asked and answered in accreditation standards and in certification examinations. Academicians and practitioners alike have the responsibility to educate future generations of scholar practitioners "to turn the eye of the student's soul" to the possibilities that leisure holds.

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