

Reorganizing the Chicago Park District: From Patronage to Professional Status

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The purpose of this article is to understand why many large, urban park districts have failed to provide high-quality recreation programming, taught by trained professionals and improved through outreach and staff development. As a case study to be analyzed, the Chicago Park District, one of the largest urban public park districts in the world with 3,000 full-time and 3,000 seasonal employees, has been slow in hiring professionally-trained recreation employees with higher education backgrounds and slow in correcting the current politically-based practice. As a consequence, the hiring of ill-trained employees has impacted recreation as a field of study in colleges and universities within the Chicago metropolitan service area, rendering some programs inactive and others restricted. This discussion will be presented in order to shed light on issues which plague many metropolitan recreation and park districts while offering a number of solutions and their implications for researchers and practitioners.

Why Reorganize the Chicago Park District?

Following the national social reform movement of the 1880s, new parks in Chicago were developed to provide open and green spaces as well as educational and social contexts for leisure that included a heavy emphasis on active or physical recreation, primarily indoor athletics. Buildings, called fieldhouses, were built and subsequently this development called for employees to staff these sites (Henderson, 1998).

Having evolved over the years, today's culture of government in Chicago, including the Chicago Park District, was derived almost exclusively from Democratic machine politics, a system that established its control in the 1930s. The primary method of control was patronage, which meant handing out government jobs as political favors (Guterbock, 1980). Park operations were top-down and cumbersome with a centralized system that left little

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room for timeliness and efficiency. Bound by patronage rules of conduct, job accountability did not include systematic employee performance evaluations or client needs and satisfaction assessments. Letters of introduction and requests for hire were given by aldermen or committeemen for positions ranging from recreation leader to art instructor, cluster manager to citywide director of recreation. In many instances, systematic discrimination existed for those who did not look, act or think like those in power.

This culture has remained over the past 60 years despite serious efforts to change it. Those who received job appointments, even if advertised and competed for, have not customarily had professional credentials in Parks and Recreation, either with degrees, membership in professional associations, or certified leisure professional status. In addition, without the approval of the local ward office, virtually no credence was given to those who had gone to a university to receive training. With a degree being unnecessary, little was expected in the way of professional accountability. Without monumental reform efforts and with only a few exceptions, the apathy and lack of a skilled workforce meant years of low-quality programming, unresponsive employees, and dirty as well as unsafe parks (Park Management Administrative Manual of Policies, Procedures and Systems, March 1988).

How the Reorganization Evolved

Early reform measures were met with little or no significant improvement in either the condition of the parks or the personnel who ran them. Decentralization was begun in the late 1980s under the administration of Mayor Harold Washington. Areas, known as clusters, were reconfigured to more equally divide the city along natural and human-made boundaries and to more equally divide the spans of control. Later, the clusters were renamed "hosts" and decision-making responsibilities were decentralized. However, little was accomplished with little incentive for employees to be accountable to the public (President's Report-Park District Reorganization Phase I, 1986).

By the early 1990s, Mayor Richard M. Daley, then and current Mayor of Chicago, sought to continue the reorganization by improving the green spaces, by providing programming to meet the needs of more Chicagoans, and by addressing chronic staffing and maintenance problems. Yet by 1993, it was evident that more drastic actions needed to be taken. With new leadership (albeit not trained Parks and Recreation personnel), the staff was cut 25% and further top-down efforts were made to decentralize the system (Henderson, 1998).

The Neighborhoods First Initiative

In 1994, another more far-reaching reorganization plan was put into action. Changes in both operating structure and culture took place. Visits to the parks in 1995 indicated that there were still significant problems similar to what were found in 1987 and so an intervention strategy was put into

place (Henderson, 1998). Its name was the Neighborhoods First Initiative and its major objectives were to place the needs of the community first and to institutionalize a new process for developing responsive programming and operations.

It also became evident that little systemic or bottom-up transformation could take place without a training component that elevated employees' ability to meet these new demands. Hence, a prototype of a Development Institute based on a "corporate university model" was developed that would create a means of initial and ongoing training for all employees, certification programs, and a curriculum to support the development of skills that employees would need in order to bring them into the 21st century.

What Has Been Achieved

Through the Chicago Park District University, or CPDU as it was called, thousands of attendants; recreation leaders; physical and art/craft instructors; playground and park supervisors; area and region managers; citywide recreation directors, and even upper-level administrators have received both required and elective training since its inception in 1996. Elective training varied with job descriptions and covered everything from dance to landscape management. Certifications such as sports officiating, naturalist training and landscape design were systematic and conveniently scheduled for the first time in the District's operating history. Even professionally printed and artfully styled course catalogues were developed each semester. The quality of the instruction and the way the courses combined theory with day-to-day applications was well received. Foremost among the training topics were the required Readiness (Introduction to Recreation and Leisure) and Capstone (Introduction to Recreation Programming) courses, which were the equivalent of 30-hour courses, taught by university professors, and also available for college credit in expanded 45-credit hour versions.

This extensive program was difficult to execute. Many employees had never been back to school after graduating from high school. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 60 and study skills were problematic, at best. However, in the past year, over 100 employees have taken these courses for six hours (three per class) of credit from Chicago State University and have done extremely well in the 45-hour course series. It is also important to note that a staff development initiative of this magnitude has never been attempted nationally before where student-employees were allowed to go to school on "park time," had their books and materials paid for, and were able to take the customized content back into their boardrooms, offices, gymnasiums, playgrounds, parks and conservatories.

Training approximately 6,000 employees over a six-year period was and continues to be a herculean task. Lively discussion and timely topics brought theory to life while the participants learned how to take their programming into the 21st century. This partnership between a university and a large urban park district was a welcome opportunity to recruit students to the university

program and may carry excellent potential as a national model for the future. It is only a matter of time before metropolitan park districts are outsourcing their reorganization efforts and partnering regularly with outside consultants. It would certainly be preferable for colleges and universities to receive the benefits of this work and not accounting and legal firms without parks and recreation knowledge.

As a testament to how far the District has evolved in the 13-year reorganization effort, in 1998 the Chicago Park District earned national accreditation from the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA). This meant that they were recognized for their commitment to high-quality services, superior management of resources and compliance with professional standards. Only 18 other agencies in the nation had achieved the honor at that time, and no other agency the size of the Chicago Park District.

Future Implications

The National Recreation and Park Association's national headquarters recently received a telephone request for research indicating the viability and validity of requiring credentials for hiring purposes. An official in a northern U.S. city (not Chicago) wished to require a bachelor's degree for a new hire to supervise a large aquatic facility. Needless to say the request yielded no meaningful data. Consequently, the official had no real data to indicate that hiring a person with a degree in the field was preferable to one that did not. NRPA would do well to monitor the hiring practices of major city park operations much as licensing organizations do for the medical, legal and city service (police and fire) departments. Our professional organizations must assist park districts in their efforts to professionalize.

CAPRA services and monitoring must also be expanded. Without strong policy statements, standards of conduct and recommendations for city officials to follow when hiring, the field of Parks and Recreation will remain an insular and semi-professional area of study in colleges and universities and may never attain the professional status it deserves. Insularity should indeed concern academics and this would be an excellent opportunity to make contributions to the field as well as ensure that we are not "speaking only to ourselves" (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999).

Academics and practitioners should be appalled at the paucity of data designed to assist park districts in professionalizing. It would be especially useful for public officials to have meaningful research being done which would assist them in making decisions regarding hiring practices and the need for professionally trained employees. There appears to be little or no research available that examines the benefits of being career professionals or the relationship between the effectiveness of job performance and/or programming satisfaction and the credentials of those performing the jobs. Small suburban park districts and recreation agencies may be able to require degrees as part of a job description, however, large urban-agency leadership

has traditionally been managed by political appointments who have not been as intent on requiring background and experience as requisites to being hired. Academics must be concerned and want to research how boards allot municipal funds for continuing education for employees or whether there is a relationship between the time employees spend in certification programs and the quality of the leisure services provided. These inquiries are not only researchable but also exactly what researchers should be studying to further the field. This would strengthen the pre-service and in-service university programs that support them, ensuring their viability and the future of Parks and Recreation as a field of study.

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