

JLR: A Means to Many Ends

Diana R. Dunn
Professor Emerita
The Pennsylvania State University

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The ink was barely dry on the first issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* when I arrived in the fall of 1969 at NRPA's Washington, D.C. headquarters at 1700 Pennsylvania Avenue to assume the duties of director of research for the association. A central responsibility of that portfolio was to advance the publication of the new journal. My memories of that early period in the *Journal's* history, invited here, are in the main quite positive. Association members and staff worked assiduously to assure the *Journal's* success, an objective certainly achieved, else we would not now be reflecting upon some three decades of quarterly issues. Nevertheless, progress was not without growing pains, arising in part from initial goal incongruity. For *JLR* began with the optimistic support of a diverse troika: practitioners, researchers, and the association itself. Two of these especially, practitioners and researchers, had very different reasons for supporting the creation of the publication, and quite divergent expectations for its intended contents.

Practitioners

Historically, recreation and park practitioners were men and women working in the field of public leisure services, most at the local or state level. They were members of several independent professional groups which came together in 1965 to form the National Recreation and Park Association. Branches were formed around the overlapping, yet disparate interests of state park executives, zoo and aquarium leaders (since dissociated from NRPA), therapeutic recreation professionals, military recreation personnel, and educators, the last-named constituting the new Society of Park and Recreation Educators (SPRE). The largest branch by far was composed predominantly of traditional urban-suburban recreation and park professionals.

Many acknowledged leaders had reached the pinnacle of their careers in the comparatively tranquil post World War II era with Eisenhower in the White House, and Father Knows Best on grainy black and white television. The sixties introduced many cataclysmic events and trends into this nirvana. One with particular consequence for recreation and park agencies and professionals was the product of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, a series of volumes, several of which featured lamentations about

Dr. Dunn can be reached at 525 Glenn Road, State College, PA 16803-3473, email at: drd1@psu.edu.

the dismal state of recreation and park research in America. One outcome of the ORRRC Report was the creation by Congress of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Beyond counting acres, personnel, dollars, participants, and the like, research was not a part of the world of recreation and park practice. The vast majority of practitioners had no background in college or university programs in recreation and parks; there existed very few such curricula during their formative years. They also had virtually no experience in sponsoring, i.e., paying for research. Nevertheless, in the new dynamic society, research came to be perceived as perhaps a relevant, utilitarian commodity which might offer guidance and solutions to new problems, or at the very least convincing support for current practices. Quite in the abstract, research began to seem useful to their interests, and a good idea.

Because of this changing environment and perspective, practitioners evolved into supporters of the plan to have NRPA publish a new research journal. As competition grew for increasingly scarce public funds, they hoped this journal would define convincingly the benefits of public recreation and park programs and services, and justify persuasively public expenditures for these. In addition, they expected the journal to provide solutions to deep-rooted problems and new challenges confronting them. They agreed it should be an integral part of all professional memberships in the association

Researchers

In part as a result of some labor studies ostensibly projecting a shortage of qualified leisure personnel in the U.S., recreation and park programs in colleges and universities were experiencing astonishing growth both in the number of curricula and number of students. Consequently, large numbers of faculty were recruited, and most joined NRPA's Society of Park and Recreation Educators (SPRE). While some assistant professors had strong academic backgrounds in research-oriented majors and minors, most did not. More often they had some practical experience in public recreation and park operating agencies, coupled with degrees in non research-focused disciplines, frequently teacher preparation programs in physical education. The number of faculty consistently lagged the numbers needed, and faculty became overwhelmed by immense teaching and advising loads, and demands for institutional and community service. They soon encountered harsh realities of higher education: promotion and tenure, and publish or perish. They were fundamentally disadvantaged in the world of higher education, where the coin of the realm was a strong research program, impressive publication record, and eventually a convincing grant and contract acquisition rate.

This last, the soft money part of the equation, became critical to faculty survival, for it reinforced the other two. Distribution of grants and contracts was largely the province of funding source bureaucrats unfamiliar with recreation and parks. Aside from a marginal substantive connection, rationale

for awards rested importantly on the record and reputation of applicants. This was assessed by indicators of past performance demonstrated by successful prior research, itself defined by scholarly publications, academic rank, and an even more nebulous quality, word of mouth. At best, this was a classic and chilling chicken-and-egg conundrum.

As mentioned, practitioners as a group had practically no experience in supporting research. Yet this new faculty cadre needed large amounts of outside funding, essential if they were to be able to undertake serious research questions, as opposed to purely localized technical problems. Without sizeable grants and contracts, research topics had to be manageable within the limitations of severe monetary and temporal constraints. Small amounts of money from personal funds, petty cash, or sporadic external funding sources did not lead to coherent or sustained research programs. Desperately casting their applications more broadly, faculty researchers increasingly succeeded in obtaining funding from sources which were farther and farther removed from the concerns of practitioners, and research substance soon reflected a growing disconnection between the interests of the former, and the studies of the latter.

Second to doing research, faculty urgently needed to regularly present the results of their intellectual efforts in significant scholarly publications. Academic leaders recognized that a partially mitigating solution to the publication challenge confronting new faculty would be to create an authentically rigorous peer reviewed publication outlet within the field of recreation and parks. They realized such a publication would have to be comparable to and competitive with established scholarly journals in the eyes of department, college and university committee members and administrators. Moreover, to be successful, such a publication would necessarily require that academics from other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and economics regard it as a desirable journal to which to submit their own work. A new journal, to achieve the respect necessary for acceptance by the relevant and important constituencies, had to be thoroughly scholarly in the most conventional sense. From these objectives flowed what seemed a quite logical decision: individuals submitting manuscripts, as well as those serving in editorial capacities, could be non-NRPA members. The name eventually selected for the new journal also demonstrated this aspiration for credibility and respect.

These decisions had far-reaching unanticipated consequences, particularly for the contents of the new journal. For example, few federal agency personnel attached to recreation and park related providers such as the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, or Army Corps of Engineers, belonged to NRPA. Yet employed in these agencies were researchers with major assignments to do studies related to recreation. They had research training and expertise, their work was funded automatically, and they had no distracting obligations to teach, or perform other duties routinely a part of a faculty member's portfolio. Before long, their manuscripts and their editorial services were aggressively solicited in order that the new journal might get up

to speed quickly. Their early and continuing contributions were of inestimable value to the journal's rapid achievement of respect in circles where this was crucial. The only drawback was simply that few if any were doing research having a direct bearing on the concerns of urban recreation and park practitioners, the journal's major underwriters.

NRPA

NRPA was in no financial position to fund research, indeed; due to growing financial exigencies, it began to retreat from several decades-long data gathering programs for which it had long been a recognized national resource. In an effort to shore up its fiscal state, the association sought external research funding, and was criticized by some members for being a competitor for grants and contracts. As a recently created national professional association, NRPA acknowledged the appropriateness of its role as publisher of a scholarly journal, seen certainly to advance its own mission as a research and educational organization. And among NRPA's members, there was substantial agreement that a research publication would be a good idea, and a positive and realizable solution to several concurrently perceived problems. The next concern was how to fund this new service, and for that, NRPA turned to its membership base. With broad membership sanctioning, the new journal became a basic component of NRPA's professional membership package. Amid great fanfare, pride, and enormous work by authors, associate editors, reviewers, publisher, and others, the journal became a reality in 1969. For some half dozen years, the financial underpinning of the journal remained unchanged, although problems mounted, monetary, philosophical, and political.

Incongruity and Transformation

Practitioners expected to be able to read the journal content as easily as they might routinely peruse an article in the familiar *Parks & Recreation* magazine. They were unprepared for content they soon came to perceive as untenable equivocation and obfuscation. Many became frustrated, even angry, and resistance to continuing support of their now out-of-reach journal mounted, particularly as it was also difficult to observe an immediate return on the investment made.

But a larger issue, one which contributed enormously to the diminishment of NRPA member support, focused on the substance of the research reported. Implicit in initial membership support for the journal had been the expectation that articles would address the problems and concerns of members, urban practitioners especially, for these by far comprised the largest dues-paying group within NRPA. Not surprisingly, there was judged to be an outdoor recreation bias, not compatible with the interests and concerns of this urban practitioner core. Real or imagined, this matter was important and divisive. NRPA responded to the growing schism by initiating a new

series in Parks & Recreation magazine, Research Briefs, which sought to translate and truncate articles from *JLR* into practitioner-friendly relevance.

As the 1970's progressed, another disconnect developed. While the many new recreation and park programs in colleges and universities began graduating hundreds of majors and minors, public recreation and park agencies encountered personnel cutbacks and hiring freezes. Supply was exploding, while demand was imploding. Students and faculty scrambled to find new job and career opportunities for graduates. Not surprisingly, curricula focus shifted, and so did the research interests and programs of faculty, particularly newer faculty. Faculty formerly devoted to NRPA's SPRE began to join other professional associations seemingly more closely related to their emerging interests. Their allegiance to NRPA was diminished or discontinued, and their relationships and interactions with urban practitioners seriously eroded. Many newer faculty never developed a NRPA connection.

By the mid 1970's, the many incongruities and incompatibilities, coupled with association financial problems, led to a new arrangement in which *JLR* would no longer be a part of the basic professional membership package. New editor Arlin Epperson first described the change in volume 7, the first quarter of 1975: ". . . the status of the journal has been very much in doubt since last fall, when financial support was no longer available due to forced financial reductions in a number of NRPA programs and services." Further explication by the editors revealed "This issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* is the first to be published cooperatively by the National Recreation and Park Association and the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, U.S. Department of the Interior."

As the new millennium begins, the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation is history, while the Association and the *Journal of Leisure Research* continue. The journal looks much as it did thirty years ago, and arguably, it serves researchers better than it does urban recreation and park practitioners. The divergent expectations which attended its inauguration in 1969 seem to have eventuated in a sort of truce, for although not a part of the basic professional membership package, the journal continues to be available to NRPA members at a special subscription rate. The journal has moved forward despite its incongruous beginnings. Now it is on to the third millennium!