

Professional Leadership in Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Services: Past, Present, and Future

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All professions have their significant leaders; our field has many. In the past few years, a number of individuals have retired and been honored by colleagues. Doug Sessoms is one of our remarkable professional leaders who retired in 1995 after 41 years in higher education. This invited commentary section of Schole: A Journal for Leisure Studies and Recreation Education summarizes the proceedings of the Sessoms Professional Leadership Institute held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on April 8, 1995, to honor Doug Sessoms.

Doug's contributions to professional leadership in the field of recreation, parks, and leisure services have been significant. Not only has he written books on the history and philosophy of leisure services as well as on leadership and group dynamics, but he has served professional associations in numerous ways. He was President of the Society of Park and Recreation Educators, one of the founders of the first Curriculum conferences held, chair of the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Society as well as of the Educator's Division, chair of the National Council on Accreditation for Parks and Recreation Curriculum, chair of the Examining Committee for the first Certified Leisure Professional exam, to mention only a few of his many contributions to the area of professional leadership. Further, not unlike many other leaders in our field, Doug has put teaching first, and has believed that the field will only be advanced if we educate students regarding how to address significant social issues.

Participants at the Institute defined professional leadership broadly to include what practitioners and educators do to provide quality recreation and park opportunities to serve all people. Professional leadership involves preparing students for careers in the field as well as helping practicing professionals be effective in their communities, institutions, and organizations. It is a belief that in a changing society, recreation, parks, and leisure service professions have a role to play in enhancing the quality of human and environmental life.

This invited commentary includes three edited presentations. The first paper by Doug Sessions is a historical analysis of the past 100 years and how our profession has responded to change. The second paper is a summary of six professionals' ideas about the trends and issues that are currently affecting professional leadership in our field. The third paper by Tom Goodale represents a challenge to us for the future regarding how we, personally and professionally, might choose to address some of the pressing societal issues.

Reflections of a Recreation Educator

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When I first appeared on the scene in 1931, the social movement phase of parks and recreation was coming to an end. Our second generation of leadership was emerging — Meyer, Brown, Hjelty, Matherson, and Nash — replacing Gulick, Lee, Heatherington, Curtis, and Addams as those who were shaping the field. The new leaders, like their predecessors, were value oriented people who believed in play and the significance and importance of recreation. They saw recreation as a field of service that was meritorious of one's energy, thought, and money. At the time, most states were finally accepting physical education as a legitimate activity within the school system. The battle for that right had been won with recreators and physical educators as strong allies. Many of those who were advocates for recreation were also leaders in that field of physical activity.

Social movements are short lived. They draw their energy from those who are committed to the cause. They emerge out of a social need and once institutionalized, their concerns and programs become wards of the professions which evolved to provide the needed service. Harold Meyer was one of those who had entered the field in 1921 as a young faculty member at the University of North Carolina. He came here to examine play, offered a course in community recreation, and began working for the implementation of local recreation services. He found that he and the University were so far ahead of the movement in North Carolina that some preliminary steps had to be taken. Consequently, he turned his attention to youth and youth development.

This decade following World War I and its War Communities Camps Services gave communities public recreation services. Municipalities were beginning to replace schools as the basic provider of playgrounds. Elite colleges and universities, such as NYU, had been offering courses about play as early as 1905. Harvard University had appointed George Johnson to teach about play and the play movement. Our normal schools and teacher colleges were emphasizing the more practical aspects of play management or playground management. We were at the beginning of the profession's development and professional preparation.

My birth also coincided with the Great Depression years which ushered in a series of programs of social engineering. These programs were designed to get the country back into an economic situation where people no longer stood in bread lines and where the good things of life would be available, including recreation and play.

When I entered the first grade in 1937, several of our Depression programs were underway: the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the reforestation of our lands and construction of recreation areas (CCC and WPA), and the employment of thousands of individuals as recreation specialists. It was also the year the American Recreation Society was created. Meyer was in Germany and Italy that year studying the youth movements of Hitler and Mussolini. It was also the year that the first curriculum