

Perceptions of Costa Rican Professionals and Students on the Importance of the United States Undergraduate Recreation Curriculum Competencies for Costa Rica

Carmen-Grace Salazar
University of Costa Rica

Douglas N. McEwen
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of Costa Rican professionals and students about the competencies needed for an undergraduate general recreation curriculum for the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica. Through a literature review sources of competencies were identified. Competencies were selected and translated into Spanish for a pilot questionnaire sent to the faculty of the School of Physical Education and Sports. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 35 competency statements grouped in three sections: knowledge, skill, and attitude. This questionnaire was administered in Costa Rica during the summer of 1993 to five groups with 76 individuals responding: 23 alumni and senior students of the Bachelor's degree in Physical Education minoring in Sport and Recreation Administration, 18 university teachers from the University of Costa Rica and the National University, 18 private recreational program directors, 11 national parks directors, and six members of a governmental ministry. The respondents considered all 35 competency statements important to be included in an undergraduate general recreation curriculum. Professional enthusiasm and other attitude competencies were generally considered more important. Less importance was given to competencies on fiscal management and administrative legal concepts. The study demonstrated how competencies developed in the United States can be adapted for other cultures.

Key words: Educational competencies, Professional preparation

Biographical Information

Carmen-Grace Salazar is Costa Rican. She is a faculty member in the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica in San José, Costa Rica. She obtained her master's degree in recreation at Southern Illinois University. Dr. Douglas McEwen is a Professor at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. His specialization is outdoor recreation and he has visited Costa Rica several times. He can be contacted at the Department of Health Education and Recreation at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois 62901, (618) 453-4331.

Introduction

In Costa Rica the formation of a recreation profession is just beginning. This 20,000 square mile republic, approximately the size of West Virginia, located in Central America, has a diversity of natural and scenic resources: volcanoes, beaches, savannahs, and tropical rain forests (National Tourist Bureau of Costa Rica, n.d.). The country has become a very popular travel destination with tourism a major component of the national economy. On the other hand recreation services for Costa Ricans and agencies in local communities are relatively undeveloped, soccer leagues being the major organized activity. Approximately two decades ago, professionals in physical education along with community leaders began realizing the importance of recreational activities for the Costa Rican people. Now, more individuals are showing interest in studying recreation as a career, but as of yet there are no university curricula in recreation. Therefore, the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica is exploring the possibility of offering an undergraduate general recreation curriculum in order to satisfy the demands for a professional recreation career and to improve the status of this field in the country.

The growth of recreation curricula in higher educational institutions in the United States surged after World War II (Burton, 1991; Dunn, 1986) and many universities currently offer undergraduate and graduate programs with different curricula (Kraus, 1990). As a result, information does exist on building recreation curricula. Burton (1991) suggested a model curriculum for a baccalaureate degree in recreation and leisure studies for schools in the United States and in Canada. However, he did not present specific competencies needed to design individual courses. Competence-based education (CBE) is another model that has been suggested for recreation curriculum development. A number of studies document the use of CBE (Austin, 1985; Benner, 1982; Chalupsky, Danoff, Shaycroft, & Appleby, 1982; Cipriano, 1984; Ellis, Smith, & Kummer, 1985; Griffiths & King, 1985; Hawkins, 1985; Kim & Wright, 1989; Kelly, Robb, Park, & Halberg, 1976; Klein, 1984; Lore, 1985; MacLellan & Pope, 1984; Priest, 1989). Unfortunately, no studies on CBE or other curriculum models exist for Costa Rica.

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of Costa Ricans professionally associated with the general field of recreation regarding competencies needed for an undergraduate general recreation curriculum. The study was designed to assist development of such a curriculum at the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica. Since recreation competencies have been extensively documented in the United States, the study was further focused to identify which competencies prevalent in the U.S. should be included in an undergraduate general recreation curriculum as perceived by Costa Ricans. Also, most of the recreation literature read and used in Costa Rica comes from the United States so Costa Rican professionals are familiar with this material.

Methods

Competency Identification and Selection

Since the focus of this study was designed for the University of Costa Rica, two of the policies of that institution were taken into account. First, the bachelor degree curriculum should contain no specializations since these exist only in the graduate curriculum. Students who graduate from this curriculum should be able to program activities or be leaders in a wide variety of settings: senior citizens centers, private recreation organizations, YMCAs, community recreation organizations, outdoor recreation agencies, and commercial recreation. Second, to build any curriculum, the University of Costa Rica, as do most U.S. universities, requires three types of competencies: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. A literature review was conducted to identify potential competencies. Since the senior author is a Costa Rican native, a graduate of the School of Physical Education and Sports, and a faculty member of that same school, it was felt her expertise combined with the literature review would identify those competencies most appropriate for this study. During the review process the senior author also consulted with other Costa Rican students studying at Southern Illinois University. For the knowledge and skills competencies, six sources were found: Austin (1985), Cipriano (1984), Kelly et al. (1976), McLellan and Pope (1984), National Recreation and Park Association (1990), and Priest (1989). Four hundred thirty-one competency statements were identified from these sources. For the attitude competencies, five sources were found: Austin (1985), Escuela de Educacion Fisica y Deportes (1992), Henderson and Bedini (1989), Priest (1989), and Vargas-Porras (1992). Thirty-eight attitude competency statements were identified from these sources.

Many of the above 469 competency statements focused on various specializations and were omitted because they did not apply to a general recreation curriculum which was the focus of this study. Many of the remaining competency statements from the different sources were essentially identical and were combined to avoid redundancy. As a result, a total of 75 competency statements were initially identified as potentially applicable to the University of Costa Rica. After a second review process in which the mission of the School of Physical Education and Sports was taken into account, 34 competency statements were retained.

Development of Survey Instrument

A pilot instrument was developed by arranging competency statements in three sections. The first section consisted of 15 knowledge competency statements, the second section of 12 skill competency statements, and the third section of seven attitude competency statements. Respondents were asked their perceptions of each competency's importance in an undergraduate general recreation curriculum using a five point scale: Essential (value of five), Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important, and Unimportant (value of one). Because of cultural considerations a word most closely translated as essential was used instead of extremely important for the one end point of the scale. At the end of each section respondents were asked to indicate the most important competency statement of that section and any other important competency statement missing from the questionnaire.

The pilot questionnaire was translated into Spanish and sent to the faculty members of the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica. They were asked to review the competency statements selected, recommend competency statements which they thought had been omitted, and make any suggestions to improve the questionnaire. As a result of this review an additional competency was added in the attitude section along with some small changes in wording. The final version of the survey consisted of a cover letter and 35 competency statements.

Selection of Subjects

Vargas-Porras (1992), in a publication from the University of Costa Rica, states that determination of professional competencies is the main responsibility of people who have academic training and professional experience from daily contact with the field. With their knowledge they can best identify competencies needed for the future professionals. Unfortunately at the time of this study there was only one person known in Costa Rica with a baccalaureate recreation degree, obtained abroad. Therefore, professionals from other careers such as social work, physical education, and natural resource management were considered representative of the most expert opinions for this study. Five different groups were identified for inclusion in the study, all having been exposed to recreation through college classes, workshops, conferences, readings, and/or experience in the field.

The first group was the faculty of the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica, and the faculty of the School of Sport Sciences at the National University. All had participated in curriculum development and been involved in informal recreational programs; some had taught recreation classes in the physical education baccalaureate program. Questionnaires were delivered to a faculty member at each university who distributed them to faculty willing to participate. A total of 18 faculty members returned questionnaires. The second group was senior students and the alumni of the Bachelor's degree in Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica, minoring in Sport and Recreation Administration. Questionnaires were distributed by a faculty member in class. Alumni were contacted at their place of employment by a research assistant and a total of 23 students and alumni returned questionnaires.

The third group was directors of the National Parks in Costa Rica. They, through their experience, had learned skills and knowledge in outdoor recreation park resource management. In 1991, many of these directors had come to the Southern Illinois University for an intensive workshop on recreation facility design and management. One park director distributed questionnaires to other directors willing to participate in the study. A total of 11 questionnaires were returned.

The fourth group were directors of recreational programs in Costa Rican private institutions. These people are working in commercial recreation combined with ecotourism (National Tourist Bureau of Costa Rica, n.d.) and know the current demands of private recreation programs. Such individuals were contacted by visiting some of the leading tourist agencies in the country. A total of 18 questionnaires were returned from this group.

The fifth group were personnel of the Section of Recreation at the General Direction of Physical Education and Sports in the Costa Rica National Government. This very small agency offers diverse activities to Costa Ricans through employee recreational games, traditional games, and other community recreation activities (Salazar-Salas, 1989). A research assistant distributed questionnaires to those willing to participate in the study. A total of 6 employees returned questionnaires. The total of questionnaires returned from all five groups was 76. Unfortunately no accurate records were kept of the total questionnaires distributed to each professional group so no response rate can be reported.

Data Analysis

To determine if there was a significant difference among the mean ranking scores for each competency statements among the five groups of respondents, 35 one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with unequal group sizes were run. As a result of the high number of tests conducted, Type I error increased and the Bonferroni correction was used to control this error. The new Alpha level was 0.0014. Of the 35 tests, four were significantly different at the 0.0014 alpha level. These competency statements are "knowledge of the use of various leadership techniques and strategies" (F value = 8.39, pF = 0.0001); "knowledge of community organization and the role of social institutions" (F value = 6.84, pF = 0.0001); "ability to use principles and procedures for evaluation of leisure programs and services" (F value = 5.21, pF = 0.0010); and "show of recognition of the need for continuing professional education" (F value = 7.53, pF = 0.0001). The remaining 31 competency statements were not statistically significantly different among the five groups of respondents.

Another one-way ANOVA was run to determine if there was a significant difference at alpha level 0.05 for each of the three groups of competency statements among all the respondents ($N=76$). An attempt to overcome the effect of unequal group sizes was made by randomly selecting six subjects from each of the five groups of respondents, repeating the ANOVA and comparing it to the first ANOVA. None of the tests in both ANOVAs revealed any significant differences.

The results of the ANOVA test indicate the different groups of professionals surveyed in this study generally agreed in their perceptions of competencies needed in an undergraduate general recreation curriculum. This apparent consensus of opinion, despite different academic training and professional experiences, adds more confidence to the study results.

Results and Discussion

Competency Rankings

In Table 1 all 35 competencies are ranked by mean importance from most to least importance. The 15 knowledge competency statements are identified by small dots. The competency statement "knowledge of principles and procedures for designing leisure services" (#2) obtained the highest mean ranking for this group, $x = 4.50$. When asked to select one competency from this group as most important, respondents indicated this competency. On the other hand, the lowest mean ranking, $x = 3.26$, was for the competency

statement "knowledge of legal concepts" (#33). Of the 15 knowledge competency statements, eight had a mean higher than 4, ranking them very important. The remaining seven competency statements were ranked as important with a mean higher than 3.

TABLE 1
*Costa Rican Perceptions of Recreation Curriculum Competencies
Ranked By Mean Importance (N=76)*

	Competency Statements	Overall Means
3+	1. professional enthusiasm	4.56
1•	2. knowledge of principles and procedures for designing leisure services, resources, areas, and facilities	4.50
•	3. knowledge of procedures and techniques for assessment of leisure needs of Costa Ricans	4.45
•	4. knowledge of basic issues in outdoor recreation activities and resource management	4.40
+	5. recognition of the need of continuing professional education	4.40
+	6. awareness and empathy for the needs of the participants	4.38
•	7. knowledge of principles and procedures for basic research and evaluation of leisure programs and services	4.34
—	8. the use of procedures and techniques for assessment of leisure needs of Costa Ricans	4.34
+	9. awareness and application of ethical standards of the recreation profession	4.27
•	10. public relations and promotion strategies	4.27
•	11. knowledge of various leadership techniques and strategies	4.23
2_	12. organize and conduct leisure programs and services in a variety of settings	4.20
—	13. the use of principles and procedures for evaluation of leisure programs and services	4.17
+	14. ability to work professionally with colleagues	4.16
+	15. professional behavior	4.13
—	16. implement public relations and promotion strategies	4.12
•	17. knowledge of personnel management techniques, including job analysis, recruitment, selection, training, motivation, career development and evaluation of staff and volunteers	4.11

+	18.	recognition of weaknesses and strengths	4.06
-	19.	the use of various leadership techniques and strategies	4.05
•	20.	knowledge of basic issues in therapeutic recreation	4.03
+	21.	healthy personal traits	3.96
-	22.	implement standard safety procedures for well-being of staff and participants	3.92
•	23.	knowledge of psychological and physiological human growth and development processes	3.85
•	24.	knowledge of history and concepts of play, recreation, and leisure for all populations and settings	3.80
•	25.	utilize effectively the tools of communication, including technical writing, speech, and audio-visual techniques	3.77
•	26.	knowledge of principles and procedures related to operation and care of resources, areas, and facilities	3.67
•	27.	knowledge of community organizations and the role of social institutions	3.66
-	28.	use of principles and procedures for designing services, resources, areas, and facilities	3.62
-	29.	implement principles and procedures related to operation and care of resources	3.60
-	30.	apply personnel management techniques	3.56
•	31.	knowledge of history and development of Costa Rican leisure service profession	3.48
•	32.	knowledge of various techniques of budgeting, financing, and fiscal accountability	3.44
•	33.	knowledge of legal concepts, including contracts, worker rights, property, and torts, as applied to leisure service agencies	3.26
-	34.	use of various techniques of budgeting, financing, and fiscal accountability	3.18
-	35.	use of basic administrative legal concepts	3.10

Note. •denotes knowledge competencies. +denotes skill competencies. _denotes attitude competencies. 1= Selected by respondents as the most important knowledge competency. 2 = Selected by respondents as the most important skill competency. 3= Selected by respondents as the most important attitude competency.

The 12 skill competency statements are identified by small crosses in Table 1. The highest mean ranking, 4.34, was for the competency statement "use of procedures and

techniques for assessment of leisure needs" (#8). However, when asked to select one competency from this group as most important, respondents chose "organize and conduct leisure programs and services in a variety of settings" (#12). The lowest mean ranking, 3.10, was for the competency statement "use of basic administrative legal concepts" (#35). Five of the 12 skill competency statements were rated as very important, while the other seven competency statements were ranked as important.

The eight attitude competency statements are identified in Table 1 by small triangles. The highest mean ranking, $\bar{x}=4.56$, was for the competency statement "professional enthusiasm" (#1). This statement was also the competency chosen as the most important. In contrast, the lowest mean ranking, 3.96, was for the competency statement "healthy personal traits." Seven of the eight attitude competency statements were ranked very important which implies that Costa Rican professionals consider attitude a very important competency for job performance.

In reviewing all 35 competency statements (Table 1), the attitude competency statement "professional enthusiasm" was ranked top with a mean of 4.56. This rating may indicate that the respondents perceived it as a fundamental element for a recreator, because she/he has to be enthusiastic to help people feel fulfilled through recreational activities. It is also noteworthy that the eight attitude competency statements were ranked higher than many knowledge and skill competency statements. The respondents seemed to consider professional enthusiasm as the most important competency for a professional career in recreation. In Costa Rica, like other Latin countries, personal characteristics are important. Professionals share many daily hours with their workmates and interpersonal relations are extremely important. Professional enthusiasm can also project a strong image to the population served and enhance the status of the profession. The importance of attitudes as compared to other competencies was also reflected by a panel of U.S. practitioners at the 1995 annual meeting of U.S. university recreation curriculum chairpersons (R. Glover, personal communication August, 1995).

The respondents considered the design of services and needs assessments as a very important part of recreation curriculum, because these two competency statements were ranked as second and third among the 35 competencies. In Costa Rica, needs assessments are not usually done because almost no one knows how to conduct such an assessment; therefore, programming of recreation services often might not meet participants' needs. The high ranking of these two statements may reflect the respondents' awareness of importance of including these competencies in a recreation curriculum in order to provide higher quality professional program services that meet participants' needs.

The skill competency statements "use various techniques of budgeting, financing, and fiscal accountability" and "use of basic administrative legal concepts" were ranked at the bottom of the 35 with means of 3.18 and 3.10, barely into the important category. It is apparent that the respondents did not perceive legal concepts as important as the remaining competency statements. The reason for this response may be because in Costa Rica, people are not as apt to sue others for injuries obtained in recreational activities as in the United

States. The respondents did not perceive the importance of a formal budget in operation of recreational facilities and activities. This rating might be the result of not fully understanding the potential responsibilities of a recreation professional or the importance of professional preparation. Currently, few Costa Ricans who work in recreation have any fiscal responsibilities. As leisure services and organizations expand in Costa Rica, fiscal and legal issues will likely be more important to the recreation profession.

A number of knowledge competency statements were directly related to skill competency statements; for example, "knowing various leadership techniques and strategies" ($x=4.23$) and "the use of various leadership techniques and strategies" ($x=4.05$). It appears that when respondents evaluated such closely related statements, they perceived the knowledge competency statements more important than the skill competency statements. For example: "knowledge of principles and procedures for designing leisure services, resources, areas, and facilities" ($x=4.50$) and "use of principles and procedures for designing services, resources, areas, and facilities" ($x=3.62$); "knowledge of procedures and techniques for assessment of leisure needs of Costa Ricans" ($x=4.45$) and "use of procedures and techniques for assessment of leisure needs of Costa Ricans" ($x=4.34$); "knowledge of principles and procedures for basic research and evaluation of leisure programs and services" ($x=4.34$) and "use of principles and procedures for evaluation of leisure programs and services" ($x=4.17$); "public relations and promotion strategies" ($x=4.27$) and "implement public relations and promotion strategies" ($x=4.12$). In Costa Rica, people working in recreation with a lack of extensive formal professional training have had to learn by doing and to experiment in real situations without any knowledge basis. As a result of these experiences the respondents might have considered knowledge of a recreation competency learned in school to be more important before acquiring competencies through sometimes unnecessary experimentation.

It is interesting to note that in the overall rankings, the competency "knowledge of basic issues in outdoor recreation activities and resource management," $x=4.40$, (#4) was higher than the competency "knowledge of the basic issues in therapeutic recreation," $x=4.03$ (#20). This rating may indicate Costa Rican's lack of knowledge about therapeutic recreation. Recreational activities for special populations in the country have always been planned and provided by professionals in special education and adapted physical education. The respondents might have misunderstood the term therapeutic recreation because it seems to be related to physical therapy. They might have thought this specialization is not relevant in recreation because other professions already provide services to these populations. In contrast, Costa Ricans are more familiar with outdoor recreation because of the youth camps and the well known National Park system that many people visit and enjoy. Consequently, the respondents probably knew more about outdoor recreation and understood clearly its relevance in a recreation curriculum.

Comments of the Respondents

Eighty-three additional competency statements were suggested by the survey respondents. Sixty-seven of these suggestions were related to 17 competency statements

already included in the survey. The other competency statements written by the respondents were "knowledge and application of social sciences such as sociology and psychology" (n = 7); "specific disciplines such as anatomy, physiology, first aid, nutrition, and aquatics lifeguarding" (n = 4); "value of artistic activities" (n = 3); and "being objective to make professional decisions and having futurist vision" (n = 2).

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that the competencies developed for recreation curriculum in the United States were perceived to be important for an undergraduate general recreation curriculum in Costa Rica by professionals and students of this Latin country. Since all the 35 competencies of the questionnaire were rated as important, they can be used as a basis for an undergraduate general recreation curriculum in the University of Costa Rica. Until this study, no written research existed about recreation curriculum competencies needed in Costa Rica. With the results of this study, the faculty of the School of Physical Education and Sports at the University of Costa Rica can develop a curriculum within the regulations established by University policies. Due to differences in cultures and resources, possible changes and adjustments might be made to some competency statements during the development process in order to obtain a curriculum that meets Costa Rican needs. Regardless of the final outcome, the pioneering work on recreation curriculum competencies done in the United States has proved extremely useful. Hopefully other nations will adapt these competencies as they develop professional recreation curricula. The results of this study demonstrate such a process is possible across different cultures.

References

- Austin, D.R. (1985). Professional leadership. Competencies required for special recreation programs. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 56(5), 26-28.
- Benner, P. (1982). Issues in competency-based testing. *Nursing Outlook*, 30(5), 303-309.
- Burton, T.L. (1991). A model curriculum for a baccalaureate degree in recreation and leisure studies. *Schole*, 6, 80-93.
- Chalupsky, A.B., Danoff, M.N., Shaycoft, M.F., Appleby, J.A., Weisgerber, R.A., & Armijo, L.A. (1982). *Development and evaluations of vocational competency measures. Final report*. (Report No. AIR-81920-12/82-FR). Palo Alto, California: American Institutes for Research. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 228 474).
- Cipriano, R.E. (1984). Curriculum development. A task analysis approach. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 55(7), 55-57.
- Dunn, D.R. (1986). Professionalism and human resources. Recreation reformation. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 57(8), 50-53.
- Ellis, G., Smith, K., & Kummer, W.G. (1985). A Delphi approach to curriculum planning. *Parks and Recreation*, 20(9), 52-57.

Escuela de Educación Física y Deportes (n.d.). *Perfil general del bachiller de Educación Física. [General competencies for a bachelor's program in physical education]*. San José: Escuela Educación Física y Deportes.

Griffiths, J., & King, D.W. (1985). *New directions in library and information science education. Final report*. Rockville, Maryland: King Research Inc. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 265 853).

Hawkins, J. (1985). *Competency Analysis in Recreational Sports*. Unpublished master's thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois.

Henderson, K.A., & Bedini, L.A. (1989). Teaching ethics and social responsibility in leisure studies curricula. *Schole*, 4, 1-13.

Kelly, J.D., Robb, G.M., Park, W., & Halberg, K.J. (1976). *Therapeutic recreation education: Development a competency-based entry-level curriculum*. Urbana, Champaign: University of Illinois.

Kim, Y., & Wright, C.E. (1989). *A study of general education requirements in vocational education programs*. Sacramento, California: Vocational Education Division Chancellor's Office. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 312 482).

Klein, K. (1984). Minimum competency testing: Shaping and reflecting curricula. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65(8), 565-567.

Kraus, R. (1990). *Recreation and leisure in modern society*. Harper Collins Publishers.

Lore, R.M. (1984). *Competency Acquisition in Campus Recreation*. Unpublished master's thesis. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois.

MacLellan, R.W., & Pope, J.R. Jr. (1984). Intramural-recreation programs. Selecting qualified coordinators. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 55(6), 57-58, 83.

National Recreation and Park Association/Council on Accreditation. (1990). *Standards and evaluative criteria for recreation, park resources and leisure services baccalaureate program*. National Recreation and Park Association.

National Tourist Bureau of Costa Rica. (n.d.). Costa Rica. General information. *Costa Rica. General Information*. Costa Rica: Instituto Costarricense de Turismo.

Priest, S. (1989). International experts rank critical outdoor leadership concerns and components. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 60(2), 72-77.

Vargas-Porras, A.E. (1992). *Lineamientos para la elaboración de perfiles profesionales. [Guidelines for the building of professional programs]*. San José: Oficina de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Costa Rica.