

# **Incorporating an Outcome Orientation into the Curriculum**

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## **Abstract**

*While the fact that recreation provides a multitude of benefits to participants, communities, the economy, and the environment is certainly not a new concept to parks and recreation academics nor professionals, the general public has yet to be fully convinced. In response to this felt need, the National Recreation and Park Association launched the Benefits Movement in the mid 1990s as a means to help establish the legitimacy of the field. Academia, however, has not fully integrated an outcome orientation into its curricula, causing many graduates to seek additional training in the field to gain a working knowledge of this approach. The purpose of this paper is to provide park and recreation educators with an overview of the Benefits Movement and to explore its utility as one means through which academia can incorporate an outcome orientation across the composite of course offerings.*

*Keywords:* outcome orientation, Benefits Movement, curriculum development

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## **Introduction**

Almost 30 years ago, Gray and Greben (1974) stated the need for a paradigm shift in the recreation profession, advocating for a focus on human and community development and not merely on the provision of recreation activities, facilities, or areas. This has been a recurring message over the past three decades with the growing demands by the public for tax-supported services to become more accountable. The cry has been for public services to justify their existence in terms that are viewed as significant by the public and other stakeholders.

In his pioneering work, Bev Driver advocated that more attention be paid to the benefits or impacts of leisure and recreation. He spearheaded the development of the Benefits Approach to Leisure (BAL) in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Driver, 1990; Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). More recently, Driver has articulated the Net Benefits Approach to Leisure (Driver, Bruns, & Booth, 2000) to clarify that recreation opportunities and resources may have both positive benefits and negative impacts. Thus, the management of these opportunities becomes critically important to ensure maximum utility to the public. Most importantly, Driver and his colleagues have continued with their position that the goals and outcomes of recreation services and resources directly relate to the maintenance and/or improvement of the individual or community condition. This position supports and reinforces the recommendation of Gray and Greben, made nearly two decades earlier.

Certainly, many others have advocated a more purposive and socially conscious approach to recreation services. Godbey (1991; 1993) has supported a redefinition of the field to embrace a much stronger, health-related agenda. He suggested that the profession recognize its role in providing services that can contribute to a more healthy society and, as a result, reduce health costs. The parks and recreation delivery system should be outcome oriented, with a direct linkage to health issues that are confronting society today.

Crompton (1993) and Crompton and Witt (1997) have echoed the same need. Crompton stated that the profession must reposition the delivery of services "so they contribute to alleviating problems that constitute the prevailing political concerns of those policy makers who are responsible for allocating tax funds" (1993, p.2). Sessoms (1993) has stated that it is time to "return to our roots" and re-establish the service mission of the profession. DeGraaf, Jordan, and DeGraaf (1999) focus on a "servant leadership" approach to recreation service provision. Clearly, the paradigm shift Gray and Greben (1974) called for years ago is upon us today.

The Benefits Movement of the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) is an outgrowth of the concerns expressed over the past three decades (NRPA, 2000). Along with many committed professionals, both in academic and community settings, NRPA has embraced the movement and stimulated its growth over the past decade. The myriad of articles in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* and *Parks and Recreation* magazine, the number of training programs related to the Benefits Movement, and the number of presentations at national and regional conferences relating to benefits based recreation services are a testament to the attention being placed on this philosophy and process.

However, even with this strong endorsement on some fronts, the implementation of a benefits approach to service delivery is scattered and erratic. Some of this is simply a matter of time: it will take many years for an outcome orientation to be fully ingrained in the profession's practice. While there are numerous publications available for training, there are still voids in the conceptualization of the Benefits Movement. More

importantly, there is a lack of material needed for the rapid infusion of a benefits or outcome orientation within the profession.

One major void that may be severely hampering the adoption of a focus on benefits is the lack of curricular material available to faculty in parks and recreation programs who are preparing students to enter the profession. Although we now have textbooks addressing some aspects of a benefits approach (e.g. Rossman & Schlatter, 2000), there is no curricular resource that addresses all three primary components of the Benefits Movement: Benefits Based Programming, Benefits Based Management, and Benefits Based Awareness (NRPA, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to provide park and recreation educators with an overview of the Benefits Movement and to explore its utility as one means through which academia can incorporate an outcome orientation across the composite of course offerings.

### Benefits Movement Defined

The Benefits Movement involves a redefinition and repositioning of our professional practice. Philosophically, it moves the profession from being perceived by some constituents as a discretionary, non-essential government service to one that is viewed as an integral component of public service and is central to the welfare and quality of life of a jurisdiction's citizenry. Recreation services, then, are viewed as an essential part of the preventive, developmental, and rehabilitative services offered in any community (Allen, Stevens, Hurtes, & Harwell, 1998). In this effort, the profession needs to involve itself in all three repositioning efforts as suggested by Crompton and Witt (1997). These efforts include real (change the product itself), psychological (change the public's perception of the product), and competitive (change the public's perception of competitors' products).

With this change in philosophical orientation comes the responsibility of providing services that directly address and impact social issues and problems confronting individuals and communities. It involves a more purposeful programming effort that is outcome-oriented. Programs, facilities, and services are not only offered as diversionary and discretionary opportunities, but they also are developed to provide tangible benefits in addition to or beyond fun and games.

In order to assist agencies in focusing their efforts, NRPA (2000) has categorized the benefits of recreation into four major areas. *Individual benefits* relate to issues of personal development, such as improved health and wellness, enhanced self-esteem, and reduction of involvement in self-destructive activities. *Community benefits* refer to enhancements or improvements that reach beyond the individual. Building strong families, enhancing community spirit or cohesiveness, reducing crime, and promoting ethnic and cultural sensitivity are all considered community benefits. Protection and improvement of our natural resources and the improvement of overall livability in one's community relate to *environmental benefits* that can be achieved through parks and recreation programs and services. *Economic benefits* refer to the revenues and larger

economic impact associated with park and recreation resources and events (Crompton, 1999). Economic benefits also include the impact that recreation resources have on property values and the attractiveness of an area or community (Crompton, 2000).

In response to more socially conscious and purposeful programming approaches and strategies, a management system must be created that allows for the system-wide development, implementation, and support of benefits based programs and services. Finally, as with any service or product, there needs to be a sound communication process that is based upon solid evidence of the value of the services provided. A marketing plan that clearly communicates the outcomes and impact of recreation programs must be developed and implemented to maximize the utility of the Benefits philosophy to the public. Thus, the components of Programming, Management, and Awareness comprise the Benefits Movement (NRPA, 2000).

### **Three Components of the Benefits Movement**

#### *Benefits Based Programming (BBP)*

This component of the Benefits Movement reflects the core change in the profession's philosophy – a return to the basics of good recreation programming. It involves the development, implementation, and assessment of outcome-oriented programs, facilities, and services that address social problems and issues that are viewed as significant by public officials and the general citizenry. Clear goal identification, structuring of program content to directly address the identified goals, and a comprehensive and substantiated monitoring and assessment process to document program efficacy are primary elements of a Benefits Based Programming approach to service provision (Allen, Stevens, Hurtes, & Harwell, 1998). The standard practice of APIE (assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation) utilized by therapeutic recreation specialists is certainly consistent with and pre-dates this approach.

#### *Benefits Based Management (BBM)*

This component of the Benefits Movement entails the development of administrative strategies and functions that are all directed toward maximizing the benefits to the citizenry. This is in contrast to adhering to a predetermined set of management principles and guidelines where management efficiency takes precedence over the needs of the public and program effectiveness. Benefits Based Management involves actions and approaches such as the following: restatement of the agency mission and goals to reflect outcomes and benefits directly accrued to participants and the greater community, establishment of a budgetary process based upon achievement of benefits, utilization of an agency evaluation plan that uses benefits achievement as the basis for performance measures, and employment of personnel and development of human resource policies and procedures that are sensitive to a consumer-driven delivery system (O'Sullivan, 1999).

### *Benefits Based Awareness (BBA)*

The third component involves the development of a comprehensive marketing plan that is based upon the beneficial outcomes achieved through Benefits Based Programming. It is a directed system of articulating citizens' needs and concerns and then communicating the achievement of the benefits directly related to addressing these public needs (O'Sullivan, 1996; Rudick, 2000). In addition, this component involves the creation and use of benefits oriented language in agency publicity and advertising materials. *The Benefits are Endless...*<sup>®</sup> slogan, logo, and variants represent NRPA's primary promotional effort.

### **Integrating an Outcome Orientation into Higher Education**

The National Recreation and Park Association has commissioned a series of studies and/or projects to develop and support each of the three components of the Benefits Movement. Publications, training materials, and, in some cases, mentor training materials exist in relation to the three components. These materials facilitate and provide support for the infusion of a benefits approach to service delivery into professional agencies. However, these materials and training opportunities have been created as professional development tools for practicing professionals rather than teaching tools for pre-service students in higher education. This lack of curricular materials appropriate for pre-professional educational settings may prevent academics from fully integrating an outcome orientation into educational offerings. This may, in turn, serve to broaden the gap between practitioners and academia.

In reality, the Benefits Movement involves numerous procedures and strategies that relate to many of the courses within the professional core curriculum of an undergraduate park and recreation program. Benefits material may be presented in courses related to programming, marketing, management/administration, budgeting, human resource development, program and service evaluation, professional philosophy, and grant writing, to name a few. Integrating the benefits approach into such courses may serve not only to emphasize an outcome orientation, but also to clarify the interrelationships between our diverse courses in the minds of our students. Ideally, with increased understanding of and appreciation for the structure of park and recreation academic programs comes a higher level of commitment from students to their studies and the profession as a whole.

### **Foundation Courses**

As students enter recreation programs, they have the opportunity to identify the role of recreation services in society. The benefits of recreation individuals receive *from* participation (such as improved cardiovascular health or increased self-esteem) or that can be provided *through* participation (such as socialization and cultural understanding) can be touted as a means by which students can value and become excited about their

chosen profession. Similarly, students may be asked to articulate their personal philosophies of leisure and recreation in efforts to identify their individual motivations for participating in and seeking to provide related services. Students may discuss the Benefits Movement in conjunction with the discussion of the National Recreation and Park Association and the need for professionalism and organizational affiliation. While many academic programs may already be addressing these issues in introductory courses, there may be just as many that are not doing so. Ideally, this focus on outcomes could be introduced here and threaded throughout students' future coursework.

### **Programming Courses**

In programming classes, students may be introduced to outcome oriented programming and may discuss the Benefits Based Programming model specifically:

Step 1: Identify Target Issues and Target Goals;

Step 2: Develop programs to specifically address Target Goals;

Step 3: Measure benefit outcomes; and

Step 4: Realize Impact and communicate successes (Allen, et al., 1998, p. 31).

As they develop programming plans, students can be encouraged to reflect on the benefits identified in their foundation courses and to strive to identify ways through which their programs can target the enhancement of these benefits. This shifts the focus from *what* they should do to *why* they should do it – away from an “Edifice Complex,” or a focus on the tangible facilities, space, and equipment, to the potential outcomes (D. Compton, personal communication, January 26, 2001). While certainly nothing new to sound programming efforts, the Benefits Based Programming model incorporates both evaluation and marketing, thus helping students identify the relationships between these skills.

#### *Additional Courses*

Both foundation courses and programming courses transition directly into evaluation courses, which should be a logical extension: Now that students know the benefits of leisure and recreation and how to create programs to facilitate these outcomes, it is necessary to systematically and comprehensively evaluate programs to determine to what extent these outcomes were achieved. Similarly, marketing classes could then link the outcomes discovered in evaluation courses to the materials used to advertise and promote programs. Human resource courses could address the restructuring of job announcements to focus on the ultimate benefits to be achieved through the position. With this integration across the curriculum, as suggested by the following sample assignment, students may then see the Benefits Movement as a coherent and relevant professional tool. The result, ultimately, is that students may graduate and enter the field

prepared to be innovators and catalysts for positive change by reinvigorating the profession's focus on outcomes.

### Sample Benefits Integration Assignment

#### *Description*

In an introduction to the field of parks and recreation, it is possible to set the tone for students' entire course of study within the department. An introductory course provides a foundational knowledge of recreation and leisure concepts and the potential outcomes or benefits that can be facilitated through professional practice. In addition this course may serve to facilitate students' selection of their specific emphasis areas (e.g., tourism, community, therapeutic). It is also possible to establish an outcome-oriented approach to parks and recreation services and an integrated understanding of the department's program of study during this course. Consider the following assignment as an example of this approach:

Your mission, throughout the course of this semester, is to select a particular benefit that you believe comes from recreation and substantiate its existence and importance to the instructor and the rest of the class. You may work alone or in conjunction with up to two additional classmates. Your final submission can take whatever form is necessary to accomplish the task, from a video to a paper to a cassette tape to a poem - the possibilities are endless.

During the semester, you will submit a series of five interim reports to chart your progress toward your goal. These reports, due approximately every two weeks, will contribute to your final project grade.

1. Identify the range of potential benefits available through parks and recreation opportunities. If you have chosen to work with classmates, identify who they are.
2. Select and define your benefit in clear, concise, measurable terms. Why did you select this benefit and why is it benefit important? Identify a recreation program or experience through which this benefit can be achieved.
3. Does this benefit occur naturally through participation in recreation, or is someone or something else necessary for this benefit to be achieved? How must the program or experience be structured to achieve the stated benefit?
4. How will you go about demonstrating that your benefit exists? How, specifically, do you plan to document your benefit? How confident are you that others will accept your "proof?" What can you do to be as convincing as possible?
5. What did you learn about working alone or working with a group? What advice would you give a new student about to undertake this project? What, if anything, would you do, not do, or do differently next time?

The above assignment, as an excerpt from a larger, comprehensive curriculum, can achieve a multitude of goals if processed thoroughly. First, students should realize the vast range of benefits that can occur as a result of participation in recreation services and that these benefits can exist at individual, community, environmental, and/or economic levels. While this may likely be happening in academic programs, this specific articulation may highlight the importance for students. Second, students should realize the value of benefits that may seem trivial at first glance, such as happiness. They should also discover that defining concepts in measurable terms (operationalization) is a difficult process that involves some subjective and arbitrary decisions. Next, as students outline the process through which their benefits occur, they begin to examine the relationships between cause and effect and the role that recreation professionals can play in facilitating change. Fourth, students can begin to make the case for effective program evaluation: That is, how can you tell that the benefits you *think* happen as a result of participating in recreation actually *do* happen? They should also gain a respect for how difficult it can be to measure certain concepts and an appreciation for multiple methods as a way to generate more convincing “evidence.” Fifth, students should gain some insight into leadership and group processes, regardless of whether they worked alone or in a group. Finally, and overall, students are invited to engage in critical and creative thinking, which are invaluable skills.

All of the above lessons are relevant to parks and recreation practice and are likely to be included in one or more courses at the undergraduate level. If the link to these additional classes is made, or frontloaded, at students’ entry into the program, the foundation is in place to build a solid understanding of the relationships between courses and, ultimately, of the material itself. Further, if the students’ experiences in completing this project are revisited in later classes, the integration of the material is more likely to solidify in their minds. While the accreditation standards specify the content that should be provided in academic departments, this content may need to be processed with students. Assignments like this one can provide the medium for that processing.

### *Students’ Reactions*

The previous assignment was piloted in a foundation of parks, recreation, and tourism course in the fall of 2000. On the due date of the project, students were asked to comment on their perceptions of the assignment. Similar informal evaluations had been conducted regarding exams and other assignments at multiple times prior to this event, so students were familiar with the approach which simply asked them to “rip a corner” from a sheet of paper and articulate their thoughts related to the assignment.

The 37 responses to this informal evaluation were enumerated, and represented three major categories. The first category involved 13 students, or slightly more than half of the respondents, who seemed to fully achieve the intended goals of the activity, especially with respect to linking the assignment to future courses. One student commented, “It made me want to learn more about how to prove that what we do is



important so that people will take us seriously. I get tired of being made fun of for my major. I'm proud of what I want to do!" Another student said, "I've heard scary things about the research class (I'm not good at math). But I'm kinda looking forward to it now. Maybe, anyway."

The second category included students who felt that the assignment was beneficial, but did not specifically articulate responses in terms of the intended goals. There were 16 students in this category. "People shouldn't bust on happiness and stuff. It's good for you. Without it, you'd be a hell of a lot more likely to go home and kick the dog. If our programs make people happy, we're doing good," said one student. Another replied, "It was nice to be allowed (even encouraged) to think and be creative." A third student shared, "I think that the people we interviewed even learned something from our project!"

The third category of students included those who did not appear to appreciate the nature of the assignment, either for the intentional lack of structure or the perceived workload. Eight students comprised this group. According to one individual, "It was too open – I had no idea what I was supposed to do." Another commented, "I just want to have fun in my free time – and I bet a lot of other people do, too. You think too much." Finally, a third student lamented, "I don't think I got what I was supposed to from this thing. Too much work! It sucked."

Overall, then, this unstructured evaluation suggests that the students' reactions to the project were generally positive (almost two thirds of the responses), but not necessarily in relation to the intended outcomes. These results could have been enhanced, possibly, by improved processing of the activity. Also, there were several individuals and groups of students who did not submit one or more progress reports, which may also have reduced the opportunity for understanding. Regarding some of the negative responses, however, the lack of structure to the assignment should not be changed. It is this component which requires the critical thinking and creativity skills.

### **Conclusion**

The incorporation of an outcome orientation into the curriculum may offer a myriad of advantages to the students. The benefits approach can serve as one tool or common theme in parks and recreation courses and, thus, more effectively connect curriculum and may, ultimately, enhance students' preparation for professional practice. Unfortunately, faculty in park and recreation departments do not currently have access to comprehensive materials to educate new professionals entering the field about the Benefits Movement. This lack of curricular materials, especially integrated materials, may prevent graduating students from developing and managing their programs and services according to this approach, which is steadily becoming a common operating procedure for the profession. To prevent the need for re-training in the field, formal curricular materials addressing all three components of the Benefits Movement may be appropriate for pre-professional educational settings.

In order to accurately establish the value of assignments like the one presented here, additional research is needed. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct a more formal evaluation, perhaps including a pre- and post-assessment of students' perceptions of the purposes of the core classes. Further, it would also be useful to follow-up with students who complete this or a similar assignment to solicit feedback with respect to the level of integration of an outcome orientation within the curriculum and the impact of such an integration (or lack thereof) on their perceived professional preparation and commitment.

At a general educational session at the 2000 NRPA Congress in Phoenix, Arizona, practitioners articulated the desire for educational programs that address the three components of the Benefits Movement as a means to prepare future professionals and ease the implementation of this approach within the field. Similarly, the NRPA Benefits Task Force and others expressed a similar interest at a strategic planning meeting at the 2000 Mid-Year Meeting in Washington, DC. Any benefits related materials would certainly not be designed as a panacea or to impinge upon the process of academic freedom. Rather, they are and would be designed to serve as one approach to resources for those instructors seeking to integrate an outcome orientation across the curriculum. The existence of such materials could also serve to clarify the relationships between courses in the minds of our students and, as a result, foster higher levels of commitment and "big picture" thinking. Our students may, then, enter the profession better prepared to lead it into the future and society's demands for documentation of outcomes and impacts.

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