

# **Choices**

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## **Introduction**

Many recreation classes try to teach students the ability to budget. While most students can easily adjust to an increase in funds to a budget, many are unprepared when funds for a budget must be decreased. An activity I devised for my classes, "Choices," attempts to make each student decrease a budget by eliminating programs (and the funds spent for the programs) typically offered by a recreation and parks department.

This learning activity is based on the concept of critical thinking and decision making using the theory of value in social exchange. The theory of value in social exchange states that an individual must place a value (or value domain) on an object (Cook, 1987). In this activity, the object is a program (e.g., senior citizen's program, or youth gymnastics). By assessing the need of each program, students determine a corresponding value for each program.

Students are given a list of programs and the amount of money each program is budgeted. Each student must eliminate enough programs to "trim" \$10,000 (or more) from the budget (adjust as needed for setting). The programs represent a typical recreation department with activities for all age groups including preschoolers, children in the elementary schools, high school students, young adults, and senior citizens. Some programs have predominantly male participants, while some attract predominantly female participants. Some programs have a large number of participants and some programs only have a few participants. This activity also includes programs in athletics, arts and crafts, tourism, programs for people with disabilities, and an administrative helper. Each student must be prepared to give his/her reason for eliminating a program.

## **A Description of the Learning Activity through which the Content Is Applied**

Each student is given a list containing nine typical recreational programs (or line items) and a line item for an administrative helper from a budget. The line items include: a Senior Citizen's Program, a Gymnastics Program, a Grades 5 & 6 Flag Football Program, Co-Rec Softball, a Men's Basketball League, a Homecoming Parade and Celebration, Partners in Play, a Garden Club, Preschool Arts and Crafts, and an Assistant to the Secretary position. Each line item has a yearly budget ranging from \$2,000 to \$9,000. A brief description of each program or line item is given (examples and directions can be found at the end of the article).

Students are asked to read the description of each program and make a decision as to which programs should be eliminated. For this example, students must eliminate a

combination of the programs to total the amount of \$10,000). Small “across the board cuts” are not allowed. The students cannot change the amount of money spent for each program. Each student must have a reason for the programs eliminated and be able to defend why they eliminated a particular program. Other students in the class are encouraged to question the student concerning the reasons for the elimination of certain programs.

### Outcomes

Students become familiar with making decisions that affect many types of people. This activity has been an excellent tool for group discussion during class. Typically, students rationales vary and identify different programs to be eliminated. In fact, some classes have developed into a heated debate among the students concerning the elimination of certain programs. In the past, I have had the therapeutic recreation students vehemently support the Partners in Play program, while a former state gymnastics champion strongly defended the Gymnastics Program, and former football players argued why the Grades 5 & 6 Flag Football program should not be eliminated.

Among the concepts that have been discussed in past class discussions are:

Legal liability - do you eliminate Partners in Play if a lawsuit is threatened?

Politics - do you eliminate the Garden Club when the president of the club is the city manager’s wife and many prominent women are in the club?

Publicity -do you eliminate the Men’s Basketball League because of the paper’s reporting of the fights?

Tourism - do you eliminate the Homecoming Parade and Celebration when it contributes positively to the economy of the local community?

Age discrimination - do you eliminate the Senior Citizen’s Program because of the age of the participants?

Minority rights- should a successful program such the Gymnastics Program be eliminated simply because of a small number of participants?

Gender bias - do you eliminate a program such as the Flag Football Program because 95% of the participants are male?

Activity biases - are students eliminating programs based solely on their own preferences based on activities in which they like to participate?

Delegating authority - do you eliminate the Assistant to the Secretary’s position and the help the position gives to you and your regular secretary?

Philanthropy - should a program remain simply because three people in the Senior Citizen's program are wealthy and have made contributions to the community of over a million dollars?

"Across the board" budget cuts - do most of the students wish to cut a small amount of each program's budget? (Reminder: "across the board" budget cuts are not allowed in the activity)

### **Recommendations for Use by Others**

This activity can be used in several recreation classes. I have used "Choices" in Recreation Administration classes, Recreation Leadership classes, Finance and Marketing class, and Topics in Recreation class. It has been an excellent tool in getting students to select and defend their budget cuts. This activity has proven successful tool in getting a large group of students to see different points of view to many aspects of recreation programs. Additionally, this exercise has allowed critical thinking and decision making to be an important element in the classroom. Below is a template for the activity instructions as well as sample program descriptions.

#### **"Choices"**

"You have been told by the city manager that you must 'trim' \$10,000 from your budget. You must eliminate some of the items below until you reach \$10,000 (or more). You cannot change the amount of money spent per item. Which of the items would you eliminate? Be prepared to state your reasons/rationale for either keeping certain programs or eliminating others.

Senior Citizen's Program (\$4,000) - Approximately 120 people participate in this program. It has about a ten- percent increase in participation every year. It has become the focal point for retired people who want to socialize. Three members of this group, whose philanthropic contributions to the community have totaled over a million dollars, have stated many times that this program is the only thing that keeps them from moving to retirement villages in Arizona and Florida.

Gymnastic Program (\$5,000) - This program has only six female participants. However, one of the participants is ranked as one of the top five gymnasts in the United States and has an excellent chance to make the Olympic team in four years. The town's citizens are very proud of her accomplishments and look forward to seeing if she can make the Olympic team. The school system will definitely not offer this program if it is eliminated.

Grades 5 & 6 Flag Football Program (\$3,000) - This is a very popular program. However, 95% of the participants are male. The high school football coach has praised the program for teaching the participants the fundamentals of football. He claims that without the program, his teams would not have won the state football championship three of the last four years.

Co-Rec Softball (\$8,000) - Since there has been no interest for a woman's softball league, this has been the most popular activity for women with over 300 females participating. A recent survey has revealed this is the "the most enjoyable" activity in your entire program.

Men's Basketball League (\$8,000) - the second most popular activity you offer (men's softball is first). Primary participants are males between the ages of 18-35. Some years you actually have made a "profit" offering this activity. You had two fights during last year's games that caused some very bad publicity from the local paper.

Homecoming Parade and Celebration (\$2,000) - This parade has been a "tradition" for 53 years. It has been estimated that between fifteen and twenty thousand people return for this weekend's festivities. Your Chamber of Commerce estimates the program contributes over \$100,000 via tourism to the local economy.

Partners in Play (\$4,000) - This is your only program for people with disabilities. It also features a wheelchair basketball team. This program has tremendous support from your city's hospital, VFW, and college. An advocate for people with disabilities has threatened to initiate a "discriminatory" lawsuit against the city if this program is eliminated.

Garden Club (\$3,000) - This club features approximately 30 female members. The president of the club is the city manager's wife. Several other prominent women are also members. The club has helped to make the city very "aesthetic" via their many summer projects.

Preschool Arts and Crafts (\$5,000) - This is your only program for kids of this age. Standardized tests for fourth graders reveal that kids previously involved in the program score much better than students who did not participate in the program. It was awarded the "Best Program in the State for Children." New York University has asked to do a documentary of the program and "60 Minutes" has inquired about the program.

Assistant to the Secretary (\$9,000) - By eliminating this position you know that you must be available at noon to answer the telephone while the secretary goes to lunch and you will have to work a till noon on some Saturdays for program registrations. The current secretary, who has been employed in the recreation department for 23 years, has stated she will quit if this position is eliminated.

### References

Cook K. (1987). *Social exchange theory*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.