

Lessons Learned

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Abstract

As resources for higher education have become more competitive, some recreation, park and leisure service curricula have flourished while others have struggled to survive. While there is no single strategy that will guarantee success in building an academic program, the author offers a number of actions based on personal experiences over an extensive career as department head, and as a result of observation of programs that have experienced growth and fiscal support, or decline and budgetary reversion. These “Lessons Learned” are offered to help assure the growth of academic programs and the continued professional development of their faculty.

Biographical Information

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Introduction

During the past 16 years that I served as department head there have been dramatic changes in the 300+ recreation, park and leisure service curricula in North American colleges and universities. While most programs that were perceived to be the elite of our field in the 1970s and 1980s have survived and have been able to maintain their stature, others have clearly lost ground and, in select cases, have been matched or surpassed by other universities. Concurrently, we have witnessed the demise of several well-respected programs, while many others have struggled to maintain their presence in spite of overwhelming odds and, what some might consider, the devious and mean-spirited acts of college and university administrators.

Why is it that some programs flourished while others fell on hard times? Did those programs that flourished, and ultimately joined the ranks of the elite in our field, use a formula for success or were they simply in the right place at the right time? And, did those programs that closed shop follow strategies that were flawed, or did they encounter challenges that simply could not be overcome? Over the years I have repeatedly asked myself these questions to help assure that the program I was given responsibility to lead had an opportunity to assume the company of the former, while avoiding the latter.

It is important to recognize that there is no “silver bullet” that will guarantee success in building a professional program. Economic conditions, political climate, faculty performance, leadership, personal agendas, and pure luck are just a few of the factors that impact the evolution of an academic unit. Some of those factors are within our control, while others are not. Through personal involvement in meetings of chairs and heads, accreditation visits, and the development of friendships with colleagues at other institutions, I developed a file of “lessons learned” that were used as a guidebook in my position as department head. While some of the lessons can be generally applied, others may be irrelevant in specific cases. Hopefully, some of them will be of value to others as they seek to move programs forward at their respective institutions.

Lesson 1. Strive for high performance in all areas valued by the institution.

“Teaching, scholarship, and service” is the mantra of nearly all colleges and universities, regardless of size or mission. We all know that each institution has a hierarchy of values that may not be reflected in formal documents. Smaller institutions tend to value teaching more than scholarship, while it is more common for large, research universities to expect all faculty to be published scholars while hoping that good teaching takes place. All public institutions claim to value service, but few can articulate what that means in forms that can be used for tenure and promotion. While few faculty can excel in all areas of performance, as an academic unit, it is important to have case studies of excellence in all areas formally valued by the institution. In addition, it is likely that performance in other areas, such as the ability to secure external funds, might actually have greater weight in decisions that affect faculty advancement or the allocation of resources. The lesson is simple: assume all criteria are important and find ways to demonstrate excellence within each.

Lesson 2. Have a plan.

One of the NRPA/AALR accreditation standards requires that an academic unit in recreation, parks, and leisure services have an updated strategic plan. While today’s economic climate makes long-range planning difficult, a realistic plan for a three-to-five year period is not only necessary, it could be critical. In higher education the easiest path is to continue doing what we’ve done in the past. Most faculty are generally concerned for their respective activities in teaching and scholarship, with less concern for future directions that may require change. The program leader must accept responsibility for developing a plan that will sustain, if not grow, the unit. A few years back I was invited to serve as an external reviewer for a university that had decided to eliminate the college in which the recreation program was housed. At a lunch meeting with the president I asked why that particular college had been selected for elimination. All programs were well enrolled and most faculty were relatively productive. His response was that each day he is approached by faculty, chairs, and deans about new initiatives, most of which required new resources. But in the two years he had been president, not one request or proposal had come from anyone within that college. His assessment was that the college, its academic programs, and its faculty, had become stagnant, and as a result, he was

willing to jettison that unit to provide resources to those that had new and innovative ideas. The college had no plan for growth and its faculty and administration had become satisfied with the status quo. Obviously, the new president did not share that philosophy. The college and most of its programs were eliminated, although the recreation curriculum was moved to another college.

A strategic plan can be an extensive document developed with the assistance of a consultant, or simply a “to-do” list of proposed activities to be achieved within a set period of time. Either way, the plan should recognize unit strengths and weaknesses, institutional priorities, and external forces. It should be realistic but aggressive, and have faculty buy-in if it is to have any chance of being successful.

Lesson 3. Have a focus.

While academic programs in recreation can vary from a single focus to those that address specializations ranging from natural resources to therapeutic recreation, it is important to be recognized for specific areas of excellence. Areas of focus or strength should be unique, dynamic, and high profile. They should evolve into programs to which institutional administrators point to with pride. A test of this concept is how one might respond to a request for one or two bulleted statements that are to be used in a presentation to impress a new dean or provost. What can you say about your program that is unique and represents outstanding performance when compared to other campus programs? As the old adage goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression.

Undergraduate enrollment may not be an indication of strength in that the popularity of academic specializations can change too quickly for universities to respond with proportionate faculty numbers. Also, it is quite possible to have strong research or service programs in areas that are not as popular among students for reasons outside of your control. Programs lacking perceived areas of strength will be challenged to create positive images in the minds of colleagues within the institution as well as among peers at other colleges and universities.

Lesson 4. Everyone is important to the program's success.

In large universities in particular, there are academic programs with enrollments and faculty that are many times larger than the typical recreation program. Yet, impressions of our programs often result from the collective activities of those faculty and students within the curriculum, regardless of their size. Given the disadvantage this creates for smaller units in achieving the institution's lofty expectations, it is critical that every faculty member make a positive contribution in accomplishing its goals. Toward that end it is necessary to realize the unique strengths and limitations of each member of the faculty and staff, and to provide the positive leadership necessary to mold those assets into a formula that results in maximum performance and productivity. While post-tenure review is meant to assure the productivity of senior faculty, that process is often perceived as threatening and negative, and does little to get those in need of a boost

back into the fold. In short, small programs can't afford to have faculty and/or staff that aren't pulling their load, so make every effort to find a productive role for each person.

Lesson 5. Faculty involvement in campus leadership.

Let's face it, there are few colleges or universities where the recreation curriculum is critical to the institution's success. For the most part, our programs are expendable. For those that don't believe that statement, I would ask how the University of Oregon or the University of Maryland has suffered significant damage resulting from the elimination of their recreation/leisure curricula? What isn't expendable are faculty that are willing and able to provide sound leadership in the business of running the institution. There's a two question test that can help in determining if your program is safe in this regard: 1) Are your faculty asked to serve on key committees? 2) Are your faculty invited to apply for administrative positions within the institution? If the answer to both is "no," this should be an area of concern. On the other hand, a "yes" response indicates that specific faculty are highly respected, which helps to create a positive image for the entire unit.

Lesson 6. Don't assume anyone is looking out for your good.

That sounds more negative than intended, but the point is that every college and university administrator has pressures from many sources including deans, presidents, alumni, political leaders, faculty, and students. With tremendous challenges and limited resources, administrators are faced with difficult choices that may have a positive impact on some, a negative impact on others. Don't take bad news as a personal assault; for institutional administrators, decisions are based on business practices more than personal choices.

Lesson 7. Build coalitions.

The nature of higher education, and of many people that are attracted to careers as faculty, is to work independently. While it is certainly possible for individual faculty members to achieve a level of success through their individual performances as teachers and scholars, there is much to be gained through the creation of partnerships with other colleagues and units within and external to the institution. Coalitions can result in the development of collective strengths that can achieve greater success in acquiring funds to support new initiatives, joint teaching that results in the strengthening of academic programs, or the creation of service partnerships that result in building a positive image of the unit. Recognizing that it is easier said than done, the simplest strategy to build coalitions is by offering resources or services to others that will help them achieve their goals.

Lesson 8. Avoid internal conflict.

A SPRE study several years back identified internal strife as the primary reason for the elimination or downsizing of recreation curricula. While basic disciplines and

unique areas of specialization may experience a certain amount of conflict and still survive, that is less true for small programs that are not as critical to the institution's mission. No administrator likes unnecessary problems resulting from internal conflict. In addition, the external image of the program can be damaged to the point where it becomes difficult to attract quality faculty or graduate students. While there will always be a certain amount of disagreement among faculty, it is important to show a united front to those outside the program. Because nothing positive can be gained through airing dirty laundry outside of the confines of the program, it is important to resolve conflict internally then move on to more constructive activities.

Lesson 9. Deliver on promises.

I still recall the one piece of advice given to me by Dr. Ted Deppe as I completed my doctorate at Indiana University prior to moving to NC State University. He prefaced the advice by saying that I would be surprised at the number of recognized faculty from across the nation that accept responsibilities but fail to follow through. He was right, and I've kept that in mind whenever asked to take on additional responsibilities, although it has often resulted in many long days and nights. The same is true at the program level. As opportunities surface to develop new initiatives it is critical to do everything possible that will result in success. Foundations and federal agencies that continually fund the same faculty to conduct research do so, in part, because of past experiences that give them confidence that a quality product will be forthcoming. The concept is equally important on campus in that demonstrated performance will likely result in additional opportunities down the road.

Lesson 10. Curricula evolution is inevitable.

As faculty, we are being widely criticized for the development of options that stray from traditional public settings. First it was commercial recreation, then tourism, and now sport management. Faculty expertise, student interest, the job market, geography or any number of other factors, most beyond our control, can impact curriculum development. Faculty driven curricula are traditional in nature and reflect the strengths of the faculty currently at the institution. Their motto: "Here's what we offer, take it or leave it." Market driven curricula are developed in response to the interests of students and/or a growing job market where special expertise is thought to be required. Programs that are enrollment sensitive may consider adding new curricular options to maintain resources, or as a means to add faculty and support resources. Often times, programs that are housed in large academic units don't tend to be enrollment sensitive while those located in smaller schools and colleges may be pressured to add new curricula to attract additional students. While most of us may wish that we could maintain a primary focus on traditional recreation and park education, the perception of public employment simply fails to capture the interest of as many students as other options such as tourism or sport management. Regardless of whether an institution decides to stick with tradition or to add new academic programs, basic concepts such as monitoring changes in cus-

tomers interests and maintaining intellectual honesty should drive decision-making. Also, if new curriculum options can be developed around core courses associated with accreditation, students will have the flexibility of moving into traditional recreation, park and leisure services positions upon graduating.

The above lessons were assembled as a result of studying successful programs and from years of learning from personal experience. They may not apply to all situations, but they have served many successful programs well in the general management of an academic program. They are offered not as a guideline for success, but as issues for consideration as each academic year brings calls for new strategic plans, refined mission statements, assessment tools and other activities that could have a major impact on the future of a curriculum and its faculty.