

**Program Effectiveness and Curriculum
Competencies of the Leisure Youth and Human
Services Division at a Midwestern University**

**Does the Curriculum Meet the
Needs of the Leisure Profession?**

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Abstract

This quantitative study evaluated the effectiveness of the Leisure, Youth and Human Services (LYHS) curriculum and the cultural climate offered within a Department of Health, Physical Education, and Leisure Services (HPELS) at a Midwestern university. The study utilized two sets of similar questionnaires distributed to two very distinct groups; 120 alumni who graduated from 1993-2004 and 86 leisure employers in the field of parks and recreation and non-profit agencies found in one Midwestern state. The results ascertained the perceptions of the respondents with respect to the curriculum, cultural competencies, and programs of the division of LYHS. Descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, chi-square, and t-tests were utilized

in analyzing the data. Results indicated that over 70% ($M=3.3$) of both alumni and professionals felt that overall management skills were important for graduates to obtain. More specifically skills including budgeting, administrative skills, fund raising, and professional certifications were rated important. It was concluded that the current curriculum at this Midwestern University met the needs of the leisure profession.

Keywords: curriculum competency, cultural competency, educational evaluation, job competencies

Introduction

The study's focus was to evaluate the LYHS curriculum effectiveness, identify the type of programs and field experience required for entrance to the leisure profession, develop a tool that can be utilized to assist in the annual evaluation of the curriculum and programs, and to provide pertinent information that can be used during the National Recreation Park Association (NRPA) academic re-accreditation program. Van Hoof and Dronkers, 1980 as cited in Allen, Ramaekers, and van der Velden (2005), "the ensuing debates revolve around a discussion about whether schools should aim to improve the instrumental qualifications or direct capacities of schools leavers (graduates) or instead develop graduates' ability to adapt to the changing nature of the labor market," (p.50). According to Allen, Ramaekers and van der Velden (2005), instrumental qualifications or direct capacities refer to competencies related to teamwork, problem solving, creativity and analytical abilities of graduates.

Education and work are inter-related. External pressure is forcing higher education to provide all students with the appropriate education, applied skills, certifications, and background to meet the demands of the professional employment market. Longdorf, (2004), stated assessment of education and job skills through alumni can assist in the development of departmental curriculums. This is fast becoming the focus of today's competing educational institutions. In order to offer a credible education, institutions need to develop a self-examination process to provide a more comprehensive curriculum along with programs that meet the current job demand. Therefore, research aimed at alumni and employers will provide educators with a better understanding of the employment market (Borden, 2005).

Hoey & Garderner (1999) and Borden (2005) stipulated that conducting alumni and employer surveys serves two purposes: 1) evaluating the relative importance of knowledge and skill area/level of an alumni's professional position as a method for assessing the relevance of curricular. By doing that it is possible to connect between the education provided and the world of work, 2) accreditation purposes where alumni and employers provide feedback on program effectiveness at the university. By doing so the university not only is able to adjust its programs to reflect the job market needs but can also fulfill a requirement for accreditation. This study seeks to accomplish those objectives.

The department of HPELS at this Midwestern University is one of the oldest leisure programs, separated by gender, in the United States; tracing its historical roots to 1896. This department was first established as a department of physical culture having two separate programs for men and women. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1978, the school of HPELS was established combining the men's and women's physical education, health, and recreation programs. The purpose of this newly created department is to prepare students for job opportunities in applied research, therapeutic recreation, hospital settings, municipal parks, tourism, youth services, and the fast growing non-profit sector.

Since its formation, no formal on-going systematic evaluation has been established. As a result, no information has been gathered regarding the professional relationship and quality of the educational competencies and experiential background attained by the graduating students at this Midwestern university. Therefore, "it is important to gain insight into the role of various kinds of competencies in the short and long terms and to the extent to which courses in higher education offer the right mix of these competencies, given the goals and needs of employers and employees in the labor market," (Allen, et al., 2005, p.51). This study evaluated the effectiveness of the HPELS curriculum, and programs offered at the Midwestern University based on the reflections of alumni or job seeking experience and employers recommendations.

Methods

This was a quantitative study that was descriptive in nature. The participants of this study included individuals from two major related categories. The first group consisted of 120 respondents from alumni who received a bachelor's or master's degree from a division focusing on leisure, youth and human services in the department of health, physical education, and leisure services from the years 1993-2004. The second group included 86 respondents from the leisure field, more specifically from the membership of a state park and recreation association in the Midwest and members of non-profit organizations in the north-eastern region of the same Midwest state. The study used a convenience sample of both alumni and employers as its selection criteria.

Survey Instrument

The instrument utilized for data collection in this study was developed in collaboration with the doctoral research team and their team supervisors. Two similar questionnaires were developed; one for alumni and the other for employers. The questionnaire for alumni had four categories of research interest: 1) employment status, 2) curriculum/job competencies, 3) cultural climate, and 4) demographic information; while the employers' survey was categorized into two sections: 1) job competencies and 2) demographic information.

A Likert scale was used for most of the questions to measure responses in each questionnaire item (1 = not important to 4 = most important). The scale of 1- 4 did not have a “neutral” response choice, thus creating a forced negative or positive choice for all respondents. It was anticipated that since participants were alumni and employers they would have knowledge of each question and hence would be able to share their experiences in a straight forward manner. Questions such as those in the cultural climate that measured campus environment and how it affected student learning were measured using a Likert scale from 1 = “not affected” to 4 = “strongly affected.”

To test for the internal consistency and the reliability of questions in the instruments, a Cronbach reliability coefficient test was performed. A reliability of $\alpha=.84$ was obtained for the instrument. The reliability test of each section was as follows: 1) job competency items were $\alpha=.87$, 2) certification, $\alpha=.90$, 3) community diversity, $\alpha=.44$, and 4) college environment and classroom climate, $\alpha=.77$. A draft of the survey questionnaire was reviewed by the LYHS program coordinator, HPELS department head, and selected HPELS faculty. A pilot test was distributed to a total ten participating alumni and employers. Modifications were made on the questionnaire in response to reviewers' comments.

Data Collection

A letter of intent and a university decal were included with the questionnaires, sealed in an official university envelope, and then mailed to alumni and employers. Responses from most participants were received within five weeks. Alumni responded slower than employers. Unfortunately a majority of the alumni mail was returned, marked as “undeliverable.” This was a good indication that the alumni mailing addresses were no longer applicable. As updated and current addresses were not available and the research group was hindered by budget constraints, it was not feasible to send a second wave of questionnaires. The return rate for the alumni was 23% ($n= 120$) of the 550 questionnaires mailed. The employers return rate was 43% ($n= 86$) of 200 mailed questionnaires. Despite the relatively low return rates, which could support the concept of non-response bias, the analysis of both the piloted data and the data of this evaluation indicated that there would be a minimal difference in the response patterns. Results from the analysis of both the pilot and the overall data indicated a similar pattern and direction. Hence, the research team concluded that the low response rate would not significantly alter the effect of the overall results.

Data Analysis

Data for this study was analyzed using the SPSS, version 12. Three statistical tests were performed: descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, and a t-test. The descriptive statistics were utilized in order to determine the sample characteristics of both the alumni and employers. In this test, frequencies and percentages of the sample responses were calculated for each questionnaire item. Cross tabulations were per-

formed in order to examine frequencies of observations for various categories on different variables such as gender, perception of important job competencies/skills and cultural competencies. The independent t-test was used to test for a difference between the means of two independent groups; i.e. the means of continuous variables. In this study the t-test was utilized to ascertain the mean difference for male and female employers and alumni on items such as job competences, cultural competencies, and job position.

Results

The majority of alumni respondents were female 67% ($n= 80$) while the majority of employer respondents were male 57% ($n= 49$). The ethnic composition indicated that the majority of alumni respondents were Caucasian 97% ($n= 113$). See Table 1 below.

TABLE 1

Demographic characteristics: Gender, Major, and Education Level

Characteristic	Alumni (n)	%	Employers (n)	%
Gender				
Male	40	33.3	49	57
Female	80	66.7	37	43
Major				
LYHS	109	90.8	40	49.4
Others	11	9.2	41	50.6
Education Level				
Less than BA	0	0.0	4	4.9
Undergraduate	107	89.2	60	69.8
Graduate	11	9.2	17	20.9
Others	2	1.6	5	4.4

Most employer respondents (65.1 %, $n= 56$) were 45 years of age or above while alumni respondents were split, 48% ($n=57$) were 20-29 years old; and 52% ($n= 63$) were 30 years of age or older. Ninety one percent of both alumni and employers

had a college degree. Fifty percent ($n=59$) of alumni respondents were employed in field directly related to LYHS and the other 50% ($n=59$) were indirectly employed in the field related to LYHS or were seeking employment. Eighty one percent ($n=70$) of employer respondents were directors and members of a public agency (69%, $n=68$). The cross tabulation analysis indicated the majority of male employers were directors (51%, $n=43$) as opposed to female employers (32%, $n=27$).

Job Competencies

As indicated in Table 2, the majority of employers (80.5%) and alumni (77%) reported most of the job competencies were most important for graduates to obtain (mean rate = 3.2 alumni and 3.2 employers). Job competencies that were ranked high based on their importance by both employers and alumni were budgeting (95%), ethics (89%), public speaking (90.5%), and writing skills (90.6%). Job competencies that were reported as less important by both alumni and employers were foreign language (81%), and conference planning (70%). An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the mean difference between male and female perception among employers about the important competencies needed for graduating students. A significant mean difference was found for ethics ($t(83) = 2.325, p = 0.02$). The mean rating for male employers on ethics (as most important) was higher ($m = 3.7, sd = .60$) than that of female employers ($m = 3.4, sd = .70$). A significant mean difference was also found for conventions and conference planning competence ($t(82) = -2.662, p = .01$).

The mean rating for female employers was significantly higher ($m = 2.6, sd = .77$) indicating that conventions and conference planning was rated as most important among female respondents than among male employers respondents ($m = 2.1, sd = .70$). No significant mean differences for male and female was found for the remainder of job competencies items.

TABLE 2

Important Job Competencies

Item	Employers % response	Alumni % response
Ethics	91.9	86.7
Budget Management	95.4	94.4
Computer Applications	87.2	81.7
Facility Management	83.7	75.0
Marketing/PR	84.9	83.4
Fundraising	88.3	74.1
Partnership	87.2	68.3
Public Speaking	88.4	93.5
Writing Skills	91.8	91.3
Youth Activities	79.1	64.5
Youth Recreation Leadership	73.3	62.5
Cultural Diversity	79.1	78.3
Risk Management	75.6	81.7
Event Planning	71.0	81.7
Senior Activity Planning	77.9	65.0
Planning for Disabled	83.7	80.0
TR Evaluation Design	74.4	74.2
Human Development	70.9	62.5
Skills for Inclusion	68.6	65.0

Certifications

The questionnaire listed various certifications in which alumni and employers were asked to rate the most important certifications that a student should obtain in order to be better prepared for the profession. Three certifications emerged as the most important. Alumni reported CPR/First Aid (94.2%), Defibrillator (65%), and Certified Recreation Sports Specialist (CRSS) (51.6%) as very important. Similarly,

employers reported CPR/First Aid (82.5%), Defibrillator (65.1%), as well as Certified Park & Recreation Professional (CPRP) (50%) as important certifications. See Table 3.

TABLE 3

Important Certifications

Item	Employers % response	Alumni % response
CPR/First Aid	82.5	94.2
Defibrillator	65.1	65
Certified Park & Recreation Professional	50	-
Certified Recreation Sports Specialist	-	51.6
Nonprofit Management	-	50
Sports Performance Institute	-	50.8
Leave No Trace	-	50

The majority of certifications were considered less important. Certifications that were rated as less important by alumni include Basic Water Rescue (BWR) (82.6%), and Wilderness Emergency Care (WEC) (80%). Similarly, employers reported BWR (78%) and WEC (77.9%) as less important certifications. See Table 4.

TABLE 4

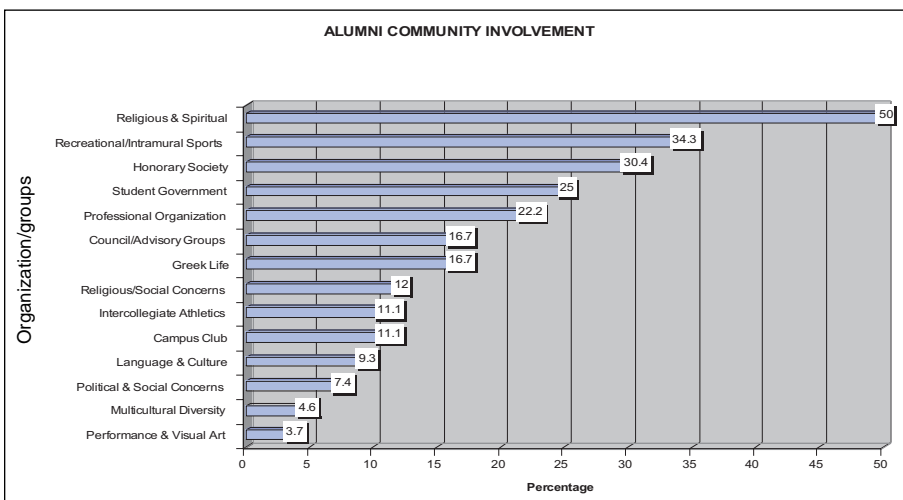
Less Important Certificates

Item	Employer (N = 86) % response	Alumni (N= 120) % response
Basic water rescue (BWR)	78	82.6
Wilderness Emergency Care	77.9	80
Leave No Trace	77.9	-
Sports Performance Institute	76.7	-
Certified recreation sport specialist	75.6	65.8
CTRS*	62.8	51.7
Water safety instructor	60.4	-
Non Profit management	55.8	-
Youth sports	51.1	61.7

CTRS* = Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Cultural Climate*Community Diversity*

Questions addressing cultural climate were asked of alumni only. These questions were aimed at assessing attitudes, behaviors, and cultural standards of faculty, staff, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential of every individual. Furthermore, the questions sought to ascertain whether or not the educational environment had values that embrace and enrich individual differences by offering programs and services that reflect diversity. Alumni participation towards on and off-campus organizations and activities was a key to determining diversity values. Fifty percent of alumni reported they were involved in religious and related organizations, followed by participation in recreational and intramural sports at (30.4%). Performance and visual arts was the activity with the least participation (3.7%). See Chart I.

*Chart 1**Community Diversity: Organizations that students were involved in (N= 120)**Awareness- Campus environment*

Alumni were asked to indicate the level in which cultural awareness issues affected their experience at a Midwest university. The elements of the campus environment that positively affected an alumni's academic life included class size (73.3%, $n=88$), and campus size (69.1%, $n=83$). The majority of alumni perceived that race (83.3%, $n=100$), country of origin (86.7%, $n=104$), sexual orientation (80%, $n=96$), ethnicity (82.5%, $n=99$), religion (89.2%, $n=107$) and disability status (86.7%, $n=104$) insignificantly affected their academic life.

Classroom climate

Alumni were asked to rate their perception of the classroom and teaching environment in relation to enhancing their academic life at a Midwestern university (1=never and 4=often). Ninety eight percent ($n=117$) of alumni reported they often felt comfortable seeking assistance from professors of the opposite sex. Furthermore, 89.2%, ($n=107$) perceived their relationship with their professors often enhanced the learning opportunity. An independent sample t-test comparing the mean rating of cultural awareness items for male and female alumni was also performed. A significant mean difference was found for male and female alumni regarding relationships with professors in terms of enhancing learning opportunity ($t(118) = -2.853, p = .01$) and the value of individual cultural heritage ($t(107) = -2.673, p = .01$). The mean of the female alumni with respect to their relationship with professors toward enhancing the

learning opportunity was higher ($m = 3.5$, $sd = .63$); indicating their relationship often enhanced learning opportunity over the male alumni ($m = 3.1$, $sd = .75$). A significant mean difference was also found between male and female alumni in the reporting of their cultural heritage being valued. Female alumni had a higher mean score indicating that their cultural heritage was often valued ($m = 3.3$, $sd = 1.01$) more than the male ($m = 2.7$, $sd = .96$). See Table 6.

TABLE 6

CLASSROOM CLIMATE: professors, race, gender,
culture, and enhancement of classroom learning

Item	Perception (Enhanced)	n	M	%
Relationship with professors	Often	107	3.4	89.2
Race/ethnicity	Often	105	3.6	87.5
Gender	Often	117	4.0	97.5
Cultural Heritage	Sometimes	83	3.1	69.2

Alumni and Employer Responses Compared

Survey results indicated that alumni and employers views about academic knowledge and skills necessary for Midwestern university graduates are relatively the same. Alumni and employers ranked budgeting (95%), ethics (89%) and public speaking (90.5%) as most important skills. Similarly, certifications reported as most important by alumni were also reported important by employers. CPR/First Aid was reported by alumni as most important (94.2%) similar to the responses provided by employers (82.5%).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the LYHS curriculum effectiveness, identify the type of programs and field experience required for entrance to the leisure profession, develop a tool that can be utilized to assist in the annual evaluation of the curriculum and programs, and to provide pertinent information that can be used during the NRPA re-accreditation program. The results indicated three important areas where the department must continue to emphasize:

- 1) Job competencies;
- 2) Certification programs; and
- 3) Cultural awareness and diversity.

Job competencies

Both alumni and employers reported the majority of job competencies listed were important and that students needed to obtain them. The important competencies included ethics, budgeting, business, computer applications, marketing, grant writing, public speaking, writing skills, risk management, and event planning. Job competencies that were regarded as less important by both alumni and employers are foreign language and conference planning. It is more likely that both employers and alumni did not perceive foreign language to be similar to a "second language." If that is the case, it may have made them view foreign language as less important due to the nature and needs of the clients they serve. The majority of those clients served could be English speakers only. Therefore, foreign language was viewed as less important. However, it can be assumed that if the question was re-phrased to "second language" the response could be different because the Spanish language is considered as a second language in the southern most portions of the United States. The finding that language is less important is consistent to the research of Hoey and Gardner (1999), which also completed a study of alumni and employers to improve university programs. In Hoey and Gardner's study "foreign language skills were generally rated of lower importance by both alumni and employers," (p. 48). Conference planning was another job competency that was rated as a less important by both alumni and employers. This could be due to service oriented emphasis that most leisure and recreation organizations have as their mission. Organizing conferences is typically something that a state or national association would coordinate and academic courses in this area are minimal.

Alumni differed from employers in some areas with regard to job competencies. Involvement in local government politics, cultural art planning and adult sports planning were rated less important by alumni; conversely, employers reported these job competencies as important.

Alumni could have viewed local government politics to be less significant because the majority of the respondents are more likely to be young and new to the profession and not in an upper management job position. A leadership position requires that upper management be familiar with the politics of the community and political awareness may assist in the development of policy and procedural issues. With regard to employers, the results indicated involvement in local politics as important. The respondents in this case were likely to be older, experienced, and the majority was in upper management positions.

Alumni also reported cultural art and adult sports planning as less important. Such views could be attributed to their background and culture. Based on findings of this study, the majority of alumni were born in a Midwestern state (95%). The Midwest, particularly this state is known for its growing population of senior adults. Therefore focusing on cultural arts might sound more traditional as opposed to the

popularity of today's youth pop culture. With regard to adult sports planning, the alumni response may have focused on non-recreational interests while the employers rated adult sports planning as important. This may be due to the fact that adult recreation and sports activities are extremely important to the residents of a given community. It is a natural outlet for adults to partake in these activities therefore the leisure profession would be responsible for providing these activities. It is likely that their responses are also a reflection of the population realities of the state. The leisure profession is aware of the best services needed and indeed the type of skills required for their prospective employees.

The university strives to offer courses and practical experience to assist students while familiarizing them with the demand of current job skill requirements. However, most alumni suggested they could be better prepared for the profession if more practical experience was provided by the university. This indicates that there is a gap between what and how much the university can offer to students and real job expectations of alumni and employers (Borden, 2005).

Certification programs

This Midwestern university offers certification programs such as CPR/First Aid, CRSS, and BWR. The findings of this study show that the most important certifications are CPR/First Aid, Defibrillator training, and Certified Pool Operator. These findings reveal the specific areas that the university certification programs continue to focus on.

Cultural awareness and diversity

Findings of this study indicate that the majority of alumni were involved in various university and community social events. Alumni also reported that the university environment provides a favorable environment for learning; to include small class size, nurturing professors, and reasonable facilities. However, the findings of this study may reflect the ethnic composition of the university; the vast majority of which is Caucasian. Departments at this Midwest university are involved in an ongoing process to become more ethnically diverse in order to reflect the current realities in American society. The Midwest university student records indicate that 87.1% of the students enrolled in 2005 were Caucasian. Seven years ago, in 1998 a significant majority of students (90.5%) were Caucasian. From these statistics it can be assumed that the ethnic composition of alumni who graduated in 1993 could be even higher. This data is reflected in the demographic information of this study.

Based on this information it is likely that the responses in the cultural awareness and diversity section could have been different if the ethnic composition was more diverse.

Limitations of the Study

Although the effective use of the alumni/employer survey can provide a useful link between improvement of the programs/curricula and accountability on the part of the faculty, this study had the following limitations. First it was difficult to locate/contact alumni. Although the HPELS department had access to mailing records of the alumni, it became apparent that these records were outdated. Due to this problem two issues emerged: 1) sampling of participants was not feasible, and 2) there were limited resources to facilitate multiple mailing of the questionnaire. Please note that the department is currently updating the alumni records.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the LYHS division faculty with the concurrence of the appropriate HPELS department leaders to research, review, develop, and present the final course curriculum to the college. This process should not be taken lightly and should not be repetitive each year. The division is currently seeking academic re-accreditation from the National Recreation & Park Association. The outcome is extremely important and curriculum evaluation and review is an essential portion of the process. A comprehensive curriculum review process should be developed and a time table set for at least a bi-annual evaluation. Clearly, the division is cognizant of changes in the profession as well as new issues & trends. The evaluation concept presented in this article however, is only one step in the overall process.

Based on the findings of our study it was concluded that a large majority of the current LYHS curriculum and programs met the minimum requirements in education and skill level needed to qualify for an entry level position in the leisure profession. As our results indicated, the majority of those educational skills deemed most important included management and administrative skills.

The study did suggest however that the LYHS division consider strengthening the experiential portion of the program. Respondents felt that an overall perspective of the leisure field might strengthen an individual's interest in a particular area early during their educational process. Therefore, allowing that individual the opportunity to gain further, more specific knowledge & skills and taking advantage of the educational opportunities that would compliment them. Suggestions from the respondents included consideration of adding the requirement of seasonal work experience, expansion of the internship program, more contact with leisure professionals, involvement with professional organizations, and to expand the volunteer requirement if possible.

The research group concurs with the findings of the study and suggests that further research be considered on a timely basis and that a viable evaluation tool be constructed to assist the division in the overall curriculum and program review process.

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