

Perceived Benefits of National Recreation and Park Association Certifications

A Case Study of Certification Holders in Ohio

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess the perceived benefits of National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) certifications. The NRPA offered three certifications in 2010: Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP), Aquatic Facility Operator (AFO), and Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI). The electronic survey sent from authors covered the type of work in which the individual is involved, the certifications, the perceived benefits of attaining the certifications, and the satisfaction level with being a certified professional. The study shows that the majority of individuals holding NRPA certifications have attached some type of value to attaining certification. Personal sense of achievement, increased knowledge of the field, career advancement, and networking opportunities were identified as the most important benefits in attaining certifications.

Keywords: *National Recreation and Park Association, certifications, perceived benefits, value, satisfaction level*

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Introduction

A common question while interviewing for a job is often, "What makes you qualified for this position?" An appropriate response often includes discussing relevant certifications the interviewee has earned. Some positions require specific certifications that the company or organization finds to be beneficial for many industries. In today's competitive job market, certifications have increasingly become an excellent indicator of one's knowledge, experience, education and dedication to a particular field. Different fields understand the term certification differently. According to Roberts (2006), certification refers to a voluntary means of achieving professionalism or licensure. For example, the certifications from National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) are not mandatory to practice recreation services. Achieving a NRPA certification means that an individual has met the appropriate standards of excellence in the park and recreation field.

The Council on Accreditation in the NRPA identifies five categories of benefits for certifications: (1) greater career opportunities and advancement, (2) demonstration of your commitment to the parks and recreation profession, (3) enhanced quality of parks and recreation services nationwide, (4) recognition for your accomplishments and ability to meet national standards, and (5) expansion of your skills and knowledge through continuing professional development. These benefits can be summarized as personal, professional and consumer (Chipkin, 2010). Personal benefits encompass a sense of achievement and a confidence in the ability to do one's job; professional benefits include one's commitment to increase knowledge and remain current on trends arising in the field; and consumer benefits are those which increase the consumer confidence in the business because of the certified individuals. Particularly, consumers, risk managers and insurance companies demand assurance that "certification is viewed as essential to the provision of quality outcomes" (Chipkin, 2010, p. 43). The purpose of NRPA certifications is to assure individuals, companies and consumers that the professionals in the park and recreation field and can be trusted and held accountable.

Despite the prominence of certifications in NRPA, little research has been conducted to understand the perceived benefits and values from the certification holders. Becoming certified is a complicated process. Cost and time spent on certifications can be a significant barrier for both an individual and an organization. On the other hand, a certification is perceived to have extra value and reward for an individual, such as pay raise, promotion, and career satisfaction. Therefore, the primary focus of the study attempts to assess the perceived value of NRPA certifications by surveying NRPA certification holders, specifically in the State of Ohio.

Literature Review

There is a growing literature on certification in NRPA related fields from therapeutic recreation to commercial recreation to club management (Perdue & Ninemeier, 2002; Autry, Anderson & Sklar, 2010; Mulvaney & Hurd, 2012). An early study was conducted by the American Society of Transportation and Logistics (ASTL) in 1996 to assess its designated certification, Certified in Transportation and Logistics (CTL). The study revealed that certification leads to advancement in professional interest, high standards of knowledge and proving of skills. A follow-up survey was developed and conducted in order to create a more innovative examination process for certification. It included educational attainment, age, position held, benefits and drawbacks of certification and whether or not individuals would recommend others to become certified. Most respondents indicated intrinsic benefits of certification including personal sense of achievement, knowledge, confidence in ability to do their job, and networking. Based on these tangible benefits, 85% of the respondents recommended others become CTL certified. However, the findings also suggested that

very few individuals experienced promotion or increased salary after becoming certified. The results helped ASTL continue to improve their certification program (Thomchick & Humphrey, 1996).

In a study conducted by Thomas Roberts (2006), the certification value of research administrators was assessed to determine what career benefits they had achieved. The research was undertaken by electronically sending a survey to both certified and non-certified research administrators. The findings suggested that the certified individuals attached more value to the certification process than non-certified individuals. The majority of the respondents agreed that they feel more knowledgeable and confident to do their jobs after becoming a Certified Research Administrator (CRA). Demographically, certified individuals appeared to be older than non-certified individuals. Individuals over 40 are more likely to advance in their career as a result of becoming certified.

In a similar vein, Valkanos, Stella and Sofia (2010) completed a study on the attitudes of certified adult educators toward attending continuing education programs. A total of 560 certified adult educators were sent a 23-item questionnaire electronically. The questionnaire included five sections: continuing education, certification of adult educators, teaching methods, satisfaction, and participation in adult education programs. The study showed that adult educators found benefits and necessity in involving themselves in continuing education programs. However, when it comes to value in certification requirements, adult educators did not view certification as a necessity in obtaining or losing a job.

From the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) perspective, *Applied Measurement Professionals, Inc.* was hired in 2006 to conduct a value and relevancy study on certifications. Both certified and non-certified individuals were studied using two different survey instruments. Assessed certifications were the Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP), Associate Park and Recreation Professional (APRP) and Provisional Park and Recreation Professional (PPRP). The APRP and the PPRP certifications are no longer offered. 544 individuals and 450 non-certified individuals responded to the surveys. Of the 544 certified individuals, 90% were CPRPs. Most certified individuals received no financial support from their employer initially upon becoming certified. However, many employers assisted financially for maintaining certifications through application fees and continuing education units. Finally, approximately 90% of the certified individuals surveyed believed that there is value in becoming certified.

This study was developed from the existing research on perceived value of certifications. It attempts to provide an update for NRPA as the major national association for parks and recreation from a State perspective. In particular, the study focuses upon the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of certifications, the level of satisfaction with being certified and the demographic information for the certificate holders. It serves to provide a new perspective for future certification programs.

Research Methods

A survey instrument was developed based on the study by the American Society of Transportation and Logistics (ASTL) to assess the perceived value of the Certified in Transportation and Logistics certification (CTL). The survey was divided into three main categories: work information, certification benefits, and demographics. Work information is an open-ended section and inquired about the organization or agency the participant works for, what position they hold, and for how long. The section on certification benefits inquired which certification(s) the participant has attained. To measure certification benefits, respondents were asked to identify these gained from certification from a group of selections including intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Measurements of satisfaction level with being certified were assessed by using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 equaled *very dissatisfied* and 5 equaled *very satisfied*. Several open-ended questions were also included in

the certification benefit section. The demographic sections asked participants to identify their age, gender, and education.

The NRPA offered three certifications in 2010: Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP), Aquatic Facility Operator (AFO), and Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI). The survey was sent electronically to NRPA certification holders in the State of Ohio in June 2010. Email addresses were collected from an online database through the NRPA website. Individuals were asked to respond to the survey within 14 days. Amongst the certifications, 163 out of 164 CPRP holders, 45 out of 80 AFO holders, and 19 out of 75 CPSI holders provided email addresses to the NRPA's database. In total, 227 of these individuals provided email addresses were sent the survey electronically. By the end of June 2010, 42 of the 227 certified individuals completed the survey. The respondent rate is about 19%. The data were inputted and analyzed by using the SPSS software. The open-ended responses in the work information sections were analyzed manually.

Findings

Sociodemographic Characteristics

The demographic variables of respondents are listed in Table 1. To the extent that this limited sample of Ohio certification holders is similar to certification holders nationwide, our data indicates that of the total respondents, 47% were female and 53% male. Of the 42 respondents, ages were close to evenly dispersed from 35 years of age to 54 years of age, making up 51% of the respondents. There were 39% of respondents over 55. With respect to educational attainment, 18% of respondents claimed to have earned an associate degree and an overwhelming 82% of respondents reported completing a Bachelor's degree or a Graduate degree. The socio-demographic results suggest that certification holders with the NRPA were disproportionately over 35 years of age (90%) and graduates of college (82%). They tend to be older and highly educated.

Table 1
Profile of Sample Respondents (N=42)

Variables	% of the Sample
Gender	
Male	53
Female	47
Age	
16-24	0
25-34	10
35-44	24
45-54	27
55 plus	39
Education	
High school/GED	0
Associate degree	18
Bachelor's degree	40

Of 42 individuals who responded to the survey, 40 individuals hold the CPRP certification, 11 hold the AFO certification and 1 individual holds the CPSI certification. Nine of the individuals with the AFO certification also have the CPRP certification. Only two of the individuals with the AFO certification did not have the CPRP certification. One person held the Certified Playground Safety Inspector along with the CPRP certification. Participants were also asked to identify any other certifications they have attained. Four of the 42 individuals listed that they have attained the Certified Pool Operator (CPO) certification as well. Pool Operation Management (POM) offers the Certified Pool Operator certification, which is similar to the AFO certification offered by NRPA.

Participants were asked to identify the type of organization or agency in which they work and what position they hold. Sixty-nine percent of respondents work for recreation on a municipal level. Seventy percent of participants are employed with Metro Parks, followed by 5% employed at a university level. The most common position held among the participants was a Director of Parks and Recreation at 38%. The next most common position among the participants was a program manager with 14%, followed by program coordinator at 12%. It showed that the majority of certification holders work in parks and recreation field and reach the middle management level.

Perceived Benefits of Certifications

Table 2 provides a snapshot of perceived value of certifications. Overall, 14% of the respondents listed that they were unable to attach a benefit to becoming a certified professional by NRPA while 86% reported benefiting from certification in one way or another. About 76% of the respondents had received a personal sense of achievement from attained certification. An increased knowledge of the field followed with 54.8% of respondents identifying this as a benefit. Forty-three percent received benefits from certification in the form of career advancements and opportunities. Increased networking opportunities followed with 31%. However, only 16.7% of participants had received an increase in salary as a result of certification. Almost ten percent of participants felt they had received additional benefits that were not listed in the survey. The "other" benefits included that the certification was required for a specific position, ability to stay current in the field, ability to better serve state association, and greater scope of professional experiences.

The findings mirror the 2006 study NRPA conducted where 90% of the certified participants felt there was a value attached to becoming certified. The results show that the majority of respondents perceived that certifications provide a personal sense of achievement or an increased knowledge of the park and recreation field. Comparatively, respondents did not perceive salary increase as a major motivator for attaining certification. Personal achievement, increased knowledge, career advancement and networking are the most commonly cited perceived benefits of certifications.

Table 2

Perceived Benefits of Certifications with NRPA

Perceived Benefits	Percentage
Personal sense of achievement from attained certification	76.2%
Increased knowledge of the field	54.8%
Career advancements and opportunities	42.9%
Increased networking opportunities	31.0%
Increased salary	16.7%
Others	9.5%

Level of Satisfaction

Participants were asked to identify their level of satisfaction with their certification based on a 5- point Likert scale where 1 equaled and 5 equaled *very satisfied*. A total of 14.3% of individuals surveyed were overall dissatisfied with their certification(s). In contrast, 73.2% of the individuals surveyed were satisfied with their certification(s) and nearly 12% of participants were neither dissatisfied nor satisfied with their certification(s). Despite the dissatisfaction levels and the number of participants identifying no benefit of becoming certified, 90.5% of individuals certified plan to continue on recertifying upon expiration while 85.7% of participants would recommend others in the field to pursue certification.

The survey inquired the relevancy of the certification examination in relation to the participants' job functions. Forty of the 42 individuals surveyed had attained the CPRP certification. Of the 40 CPRPs, 20% were not required to take the CPRP certification examination at the time of certification. These individuals were certified prior to 1990 and were grandfathered in to the new certification policies and procedures. At the time these individuals were certified, they only had to show proof of experience and education to receive certification. Of those who took the test, 30% believed the test was relevant, 25% believed the test was not relevant, and 25% believed that only about half of the certifying test was relevant. Seventy-five percent of the participants stated that the CPRP examination is too theoretical and base its questions too much on textbooks rather than the reality of the field. However, many acknowledged that the CPRP examination covered a very wide variety of information relating to the field. Some individuals found the wide variety of questions to be valuable and necessary as a true recreation professional should be educated in all areas of the field. Comparatively, more than half of the AFOs certified believe their certifying test was relevant. One participant commented that the Certified Pool Operator (CPO) examination was more comprehensive than the AFO examination. The one individual that has attained the CPSI certification believed the test to be relevant to his/her job functions.

Limitations and Conclusions

There is a limitation for the low response rate from the practitioners in Ohio. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results to the broader population of NRPA certification holders. Despite the limitations, this study provided an update for perceived benefits of NRPA certifications and shed light on their perspectives of being certified. According to sociodemographics, the number of certified professionals increased slightly with age. Only 4 individuals from 25-34 years old were NRPA certified and responded to the survey. The number of certified recreation professionals increased to 21 individuals between 35 and 54 years old. Sixteen individuals over 55 years old responded to the survey showing they have years of work experience in the field. In terms of education, the overwhelming majority received bachelor or graduate degrees. The findings of age and education echo Roberts' (2006) study that individuals over 40 years old were more likely to attain certifications.

The perceived benefits were categorized by intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives. Intrinsic benefits include an increased knowledge of the field and a personal sense of achievement. Extrinsic benefits are comprised of an increased salary, career opportunities or advancement and increased networking opportunities. The majority of participants who were able to attach benefits to certification identified intrinsic benefits as the most prevalent. Extrinsic benefits were harder to come by. This study found that 54.8% of the individuals surveyed gained an increased knowledge of the field from becoming certified. Perhaps this is due to the certification examinations acting as entry-level certifications and covering a broad variety of information as many of our participants noted in the survey.

This study supports the Valkanos, Stella, and Sofia (2010) study that the majority of the participants did not find their certification a necessity in obtaining or losing their job. Only 12% of the individuals surveyed with NRPA certifications are employed by organizations that require NRPA certification, confirming that a certification is not necessarily an essential component for getting a job. The level of satisfaction derived from personal sense of achievement, increased knowledge of the field, career advancement, and networking opportunities.

There are several points of interest that stem from this study that should be useful for the future development of NRPA certifications. Until it improves test relevancy and better regulates a certification requirement for parks and recreation positions, practitioners in Ohio will continue to only see the value of certification intrinsically. However, recently, NRPA is making strides to the accreditation of their certifications with the National Certifying Board (Chipkin, 2010). This accreditation could mean increased benefits for the certification holders. Chipkin (2010) quoted Janice Geben, a former employee of the Colorado Parks and Recreation Department, as stating one reason NRPA certifications are still uncommon is because there is no guarantee becoming certified will increase one's salary. The research conducted here confirms this opinion from Janice Geben as only 16.7% of the individuals surveyed in Ohio had experienced an increase in salary as a result of becoming a certified professional. Several of the individuals surveyed in this study noted that the certification tests covered a very wide variety of information. This would be appropriate for entry-level positions. However, there seems to be a demand for more specialized certifications as professionals grow and specialize in their field. The new Certified Park and Recreation Executive (CPRE) may provide a better opportunity for professionals in managerial levels.

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