

## Using Competencies to Assess Entry-Level Knowledge of Students Graduating from Parks and Recreation Academic Programs

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### Abstract

To address the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions accreditation standard 7.01.01, the Entry Level Competency Assessment was developed to measure 46 competencies in four categories needed by entry level professionals. Students rated their competence prior to beginning their senior internship. The results indicated that students were most confident in their abilities with interpersonal, professional practice, leadership/management, and community relations competencies. In addition, the findings indicated that students were more confident with competencies that they had actually experienced and less certain about competencies that were discussed in class but not experienced in the field. The instrument used in this study was a reliable measure and has the potential to be incorporated by other academic programs to measure how well students perceive their abilities to be successful in the future and to reveal curricular weaknesses that can be enhanced to increase student competence.

**Keywords:** *assessment; competencies; entry-level professional; accreditation; self-perceptions*

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## Introduction

Many parks and recreation departments have been involved in assessment for years through mandates from the university or higher level state boards of education. However, when the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT) introduced new accreditation standards in 2008 (COAPRT, 2013), this caused many departments to reevaluate their assessment plan beyond these mandates. In our case, we were assessing learning outcomes, but in a much different way than COAPRT was advocating through the revised standards and process of accreditation. The faculty developed more general learning outcomes focusing on foundations, programming, management, and professional issues. The new accreditation standards prompted us to implement more thorough assessment methods and take a much more in depth look at the education students receive. This change required a considerable amount of time for planning, implementation, data collection, and analysis. It is still an ongoing process that continues to evolve each semester.

Being prepared for an entry-level position requires having the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics needed to be successful. One method to measure this is the use of the Entry-Level Competency Assessment. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of this tool to measure the level of perceived professional preparation of students while addressing COAPRT standard 7.01.01: Entry Level Competencies.

### Assessing Competencies

Assessing competencies first requires an understanding of assessment. The term *assessment*, in relation to learning is defined by Palomba and Banta (1999) as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development” (p.4). This term is similarly defined in most institutions of higher education. In fact, assessment is a practice commonly implemented to measure learning and examine campus and program success in higher education (Freeman & Kochan, 2012). In an examination of academic programs in parks and recreation, Ross, Young, and Sturts (2012) suggested that faculty members and administrators felt that improved student learning and continuous program improvement were the primary purposes of academic assessment. One way to look at student learning and program improvement is through the examination of competencies. Gardner (2009) suggested that higher education has responded to the needs of employers and has made an effort to focus learning more on competencies and performance based assessment of competencies. Voorhees (2001) indicated that emphasizing competencies in student learning shifts the focus from instructional delivery to student performance. Competencies have been a common discussion in professional development for many years.

Competencies are defined as essential knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics, needed to be effective on the job (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999). McLagan (1997) determined that there are essentially five different types of competencies:

1. Task competencies: work activities and procedures, often outlined in a job description.
2. Results competencies: relate to specific or desired results (ie. ability to generate revenue).
3. Output competencies: something an individual or team produces or delivers.

4. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes competencies: knowledge of a subject matter, possessing abilities, and positive work-related attitudes and values.
5. Superior performance competencies: the competencies that superior workers have and others do not. These competencies differentiate outstanding employees from average ones.

Competency use first became common in the business industry and later moved to nonprofit and public agencies. They are used for such things as establishing hiring criteria, developing job descriptions and evaluation tools, setting performance benchmarks, and guiding professional development and job progressions. Competencies give organizations a systematic approach to many human resources functions.

The literature on competencies in the parks and recreation profession is continuing to grow in several different aspects of the profession. There are determined competencies in recreational sports (Jamieson, 1987; Barcelona & Ross, 2004; Ball, Simpson, Ardovino, & Skemp-Arlt, 2008; Schneider, Stier, Kampf, Haines & Wilding, 2006), the sports industry (Quain & Parks, 1986), athletic club managers (Lambrecht, 1987; Kouslelious, 2003), public parks and recreation (Busser & Bannon, 1987; Smale & Frisby, 1992; Hurd & McLean, 2004; Hurd, 2005), federal employees (National Park Service, 1999), YMCA CEOs (Hurd & Buschbom, 2010), and commercial recreation (Hammersley & Tynon, 1998).

The study that most influenced the assessment instrument that was adapted for use as a tool at Midwest University was the entry-level competency framework (ELCF) (Hurd, 2005). The ELCF was created using a Delphi study of entry level park and recreation professionals across the country. It has five general competency categories including: communication, community relations, interpersonal skills, leadership and management, and professional practice. Within these five categories are 53 specific competencies. These specific competencies focused on such things as the hiring process, programming, networking, and budgeting. The Delphi group evaluated the importance of each specific competency and six were rated as extremely important. They include the ability to (a) clearly communicate with customers, (b) listen to staff and customers, (c) deal with the public, (d) clearly communicate with staff, (e) know how to act professionally, and (f) manage multiple tasks.

Despite the significant number of competency studies in leisure services, there is no consensus on a common core set of competencies for parks and recreation professionals because of the diversity of jobs available within the profession. However, common attributes in most of these studies include such things as finance, communication, decision making, problem solving, and programming. COAPRT standards have remained general so as to accommodate the competencies and outcomes that best represent each individual parks and recreation academic unit.

## Methodology

The ELCF (Hurd 2005) was used as a foundation to develop an assessment that was general enough to apply to all parks and recreation majors, with the exception of therapeutic recreation (TR), who implement a similar instrument specific to TR.

The resulting Entry-Level Competency Assessment (ELCA) is a four-category (community relations, interpersonal skills, leadership and management, professional practice) and 46-item assessment that requires students to rate their perceived abilities on

such things as customer service, programming, staff scheduling, and budgeting. Students are provided a five point Likert scale with a “not applicable” option if the student has no experience in an area.

This assessment is primarily used to measure COAPRT standard 7.01.01: Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate entry-level knowledge of the scope of the profession that is the focus of the program, along with professional practices of that profession. However, student responses over time to certain competencies are used to enhance content specific courses, totally unrelated to specific accreditation standards, but necessary to develop better future professionals.

Students completed the competency assessment at the end of the capstone course in their final semester on campus before embarking on their senior internships. The assessment survey was placed online using Select Survey software. Students were required to provide their university identification so that faculty were aware they had completed the assessment. They were also instructed that the survey was for assessment purposes as well as their own understanding of their abilities to enter an entry-level position. Students were told that they were not graded on the completion of the entry-level competency assessment, but there that there was an expectation that they would complete it.

The assessment, while predominantly based on the ELCF, had a few modifications to the competencies to better meet our assessment needs. The categories in the entry-level competency assessment were reduced from five to four because of the small number of items within each category. As such, communications and community relations were combined. There were a few ELCF competencies that were removed to make the instrument better meet the needs of the faculty and students in terms of assessment. For example, *have fun in your career*, *need and want to help children*, and *know how to meet the needs of the community* were removed from the assessment instrument. Furthermore, three competencies were added to better address our professional expectations of the students including *possessing positive work habits*, *attendance and punctuality*, and *ability to dress professionally*.

Data have been collected each semester since the Spring 2012 semester resulting in three semesters worth of data. The data have been analyzed, presented to faculty, and discussed as a group to ascertain trends and improvements to be made to the curriculum or course content.

## Results

### *Sampling/Instrumentation*

Of the 122 students who were invited to participate in the assessment, 118 completed it (96.7%). Since this assessment was modified for our students and some items were added to the scale, reliability analyses were conducted on the overall scale, as well as the competency categories. Cronbach's alpha for the competency scale was found to be a highly reliable measure of student's perceived competency (0.98). Additionally, the scale was reliable within the factors of the scale, including Leadership/Management competencies ( $\alpha=0.95$ ), Professional Practice competencies ( $\alpha=0.93$ ), Interpersonal Relations competencies ( $\alpha=0.91$ ), and Community Relations competencies ( $\alpha=0.78$ ).

### Results

Student respondents indicated their level of competence, with 1=*extremely poor*, and 5=*excellent*. On average, students indicated the most competence in the interpersonal

category ( $M=4.17$ ,  $SD=0.66$ ), followed by professional practice ( $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), and leadership/management factors ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ). While the community relations factor was not significantly lower than other categories, it was the lowest average ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ) according to students completing to the assessment.

Upon examining the individual items in the scale, students indicated the most competence in several of the interpersonal competence factors, including the *ability to work with others* ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), the *ability to be flexible* ( $M=4.46$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ), and the *ability to have a positive attitude* ( $M=4.44$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ). In terms of professional practice factors, students signified a high *ability to act professionally* ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ), *dress professionally* ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), and *be punctual* ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ).

Some of the areas in which students did not feel as competent were subsumed within the leadership/management factor, including the *ability to discipline and/or fire staff* ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ), an *understanding of financial practices* ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ), and the *ability to develop and manage a budget* ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ). Within the community relations factor, student respondents do not feel competent in the ability to meet community needs ( $M=3.49$ ,  $SD=0.76$ ). See Table 1 for a breakdown of individual competency and factor means.

**Table 1**

*Mean Scores for Competencies*

Competencies	Mean	SD
Community Relations Factors	3.83	0.60
Knowledge of the community and composition	3.42	0.72
Knowledge of how to meet community needs	3.49	0.76
Possession of understanding of customer service practices	4.15	0.79
Possession of ability to deal with the public	4.24	0.83
Interpersonal Factors	4.17	0.66
Ability to be creative and innovative	3.93	0.81
Ability to be flexible	4.46	0.69
Being patient	4.16	0.89
Be enthusiastic on the job	4.29	0.81
Have a positive attitude	4.44	0.72
Ability to work well with people	4.47	0.71
Being open minded	4.29	0.79
Being able to deal with personality conflicts	4.00	0.84
Understanding and accepting constructive criticism	4.07	0.87
Being a self-starter	3.82	0.87
Ability to take initiative	4.08	0.81
Ability to deal with office politics	3.61	0.93
Leadership/Management Factors	3.94	0.67
Ability to resolve conflict and solve problems	3.97	0.74
Ability to think quickly	4.02	0.74
Ability to make ethical decision	4.09	0.81
Understanding of financial practices	3.26	0.87
Ability to develop and manage a budget	3.38	0.81

**Table 1 (cont.)**

Competencies	Mean	SD
Understanding of the hiring process	3.70	0.84
Ability to discipline and/or fire staff	3.23	0.98
Ability to motivate employees	3.88	0.76
Possession of leadership skills and abilities	4.08	0.77
Ability to work in a team	4.51	0.70
Knowledgeable of management principles	3.83	0.89
Ability to supervise staff	3.95	0.93
Willing to work long, non-traditional hours	4.22	0.78
Ability to utilize effective organizational skills	4.04	0.85
Ability to manage multiple tasks	4.09	0.78
Ability to effectively manage time	4.07	0.87
Ability to set priorities	4.13	0.78
Professional Practice Factors	4.10	0.71
Know how to position self for career advancement	3.70	0.93
Ability to use computers and software	3.92	0.86
Ability to program activities and events	4.15	0.79
Ability to schedule programs, activities or events	4.13	0.81
Ability to schedule staff	3.80	0.95
Has basic knowledge of the field in several areas	4.02	0.89
Has knowledge of the parks and recreation field as a whole	3.92	0.86
Ability to network within and outside of the profession	3.87	0.96
Knowledge of how to act professionally	4.47	0.68
Has positive work habits	4.26	0.79
Ability to be in attendance and punctual	4.40	0.84
Ability to dress appropriate to the work setting	4.47	0.71

*Note.* 1-Extremely poor, 2-Below average, 3-Average, 4-Above average, 5-Excellent. N=118

## Discussion

In reviewing the results of the ELCA to date, several issues emerged. First, in general students did not feel competent in many areas that have specific classes attached to them. For example, the *ability to discipline and/or fire staff*, the *ability to develop and manage a budget*, and an *understanding of the hiring process* were consistently rated low. Perhaps the students simply are not confident, or do not realize that the purpose of these courses is to provide the tools and perspective to be successful when entering the profession and gaining hands-on experience in a particular area. If a student was exposed to different types of budgeting in a course, for example, they may not fully understand how much they know or what they have learned until they actually develop a budget for their agency. Many of the lower rated competencies were those where students were exposure to the concepts in the classroom, but not given actual experiences to increase their perceived competence.

A second issue is that students indicated that they have more skills in areas that could be developed through part-time job/volunteer experiences where they can actually experience

the competencies. Competencies such as *working as a team*, *working well with people*, and *knowing how to act professionally* have all been required elements of their practicums, volunteer experiences, and service learning projects. It is evident that if students have out-of-class exposure to a competency area, they seem to feel more confident about it. This suggests that measuring competence before and after the internship experience may confirm significant changes in competence. Furthermore, it might be beneficial to measure students on these competencies at the beginning of the program to determine how much growth they experience on such things as budget and human resources from the start of the program (before any exposure) to after classroom exposure to the concept.

Lastly, the results between the ELCF and the ELCA were not directly compared because the ELCF was asking about the most important competencies needed for entry-level positions, while the ELCA was asking the individuals to rate self-assessed competence on that item. However, there were some positive results when examining competencies that were rated as extremely important for entry level employees. For example, the *ability to work in a team*, *ability to work well with people*, *ability to be flexible*, *ability to deal with the public*, and the *ability to manage multiple tasks* were rated as very important to entry level employees and competencies in which students felt they were highly skilled.

The issues that have emerged from the assessment have resulted in faculty discussion and actions to improve how courses are taught. A concerted effort is being made to provide as many real experiences to students as possible through service learning assignments, discussions with practitioners in the field, and discussions on current events in the profession.

## Conclusion

A predominant theme that emerged early in the data collection was that students needed real experiences so that they can put their classroom knowledge to work in the profession to gain the self-confidence needed to feel prepared for their first position in the field. It is unrealistic to think that every competency can have a practical experience attached to it, but class projects and assignments can be implemented that may infuse some of these lower rated competencies.

The ECA has some additional future potential to enhance both assessment and student development. First, students currently take the assessment prior to the start of their internship. It would be beneficial to have them complete the ELCA at the completion of their internship to see what progress was made and what competencies they need to build to better position themselves for an entry-level position. Second, the ELCA could be used to set internship goals. Students assess their weaknesses and set those weaknesses as priorities to improve during the internship. Oftentimes, strengthening the ELCA competencies is a matter of gaining experience in a specific area, and candid discussions about student weaknesses with the agency supervisor can lead to a pointed effort to enhance that competency. Third, the ELCA could potentially be used as the midterm and final evaluation tool for the internship. With this, the student rates themselves and compares his/her rating to that of the internship supervisor. A downside of this approach is that internship supervisors have a tendency to over inflate ratings for the student. However, an honest assessment by the supervisor can be used by the student to measure their actual competence and not just their perceived competence. Fourth, as more data are collected, faculty will be able to track trends and compare where changes were made in courses to ascertain if these



changes positively impacted students' self-assessed competence levels. Last, it would be interesting to follow students longitudinally by measuring their competence pre-internship, post internship and then annually through their first entry-level position.

In terms of further research, this assessment instrument was used as a self-assessment and not a rating of actual competence. Future research should examine actual competencies rather than self-assessed competencies. This study would be important in seeing the difference between the two concepts of actual and perceived competence.

While the results here are specific to one university and not generalizable, it may be more important to understand the process and potential of the instrument than the results. Further research and construct validation of the competencies might provide other universities the opportunity to assess perceived competencies of their students. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2009), generalizing across a population could lead to erroneous interpretation of results until repetition of research can be conducted to test construct validity. The assessment described here, which is highly reliable, can be implemented in most universities after conducting more study in this area. While each would likely have different results, it serves as a means to examine the curriculum, assignments, and student progress on a number of different factors in order for well-informed decisions to be made.

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