

## Words Matter

*A Semantic Differential Study of Recreation, Leisure, Play, Activity, and Sport*

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### Abstract

Beyond the standard definitions found in the dictionary, words commonly used in the recreation field have subtle, yet powerful connotations of which senders and receivers of information may not be consciously aware. These words elicit different conscious and subconscious reactions that likely bear significant consequences for recreation agencies and university departments. This study measured the attitudes of three distinct populations (university students, citizens and recreation professionals) toward five words commonly used in the field: *recreation*, *leisure*, *play*, *activity* and *sport*. A semantic differential instrument was used to gather responses and interpret connotative meanings relating to the words. Further, a survey was administered to a random sample of citizens in a Midwestern state regarding applied questions (e.g., asking citizens if it were more appropriate to spend tax money to provide *recreation services* or to provide *leisure services*). A factor analysis yielded three factors: evaluative (good–bad), potency (powerful–powerless) and activity (fast–slow). Within and across subject group comparisons were subsequently performed on the three factors and significant differences amongst the three populations in the evaluative, potency and activity factors were found for each of the five words.

**Keywords:** *semantic differential; leisure; recreation; play; meaning; marketing*

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## Introduction

Recreation professionals and educators have struggled for decades with choosing appropriate words to describe the services they offer and the subject matter they address. Should they use the word recreation, leisure, activities, sport, play or something else? Is it preferable for a local park and recreation department to ask taxpayers for additional money to offer increased *recreation services* or increased *leisure activities*? Considering another setting, do academic departments have more legitimacy if they call themselves *Recreation Studies Departments* or *Leisure Studies Departments*? How about *Departments of Play Studies*? These perennial questions and conundrums underscore that the use of a particular word or term can have a profound impact on the message communicated to both external and internal constituencies. It is even possible that the careless use of a particular word may be counterproductive. For instance, an academic major identified as *Leisure Studies* could elicit an entirely different response from parents, peers and potential employers than would a major in *Parks, Recreation and Tourism*.

Parr and Lashua (2004) sought to determine the differences or similarities of how practitioners within the field define leisure and also how those definitions compare to individuals outside of the field. This research indicated that culturally correct definitions of leisure were shared across populations. In an earlier study, Hemingway and Parr (2000) discussed the differing paradigms of leisure researchers and leisure practitioners. The paradigms held by either group can lead to a situation in which “personal or professional preferences or ideologies prevail over analysis, leading to conceptualizations of the research-practice relation that are reductionist (one term is subordinated to the other) or oppositional (the two terms are irreconcilable)” (pp. 139–140). This disconnect, they argue, creates problems with regard to finding opportunities to promote and provide developmental and emancipatory activities.

In 2005, Parr and Lashua expanded their consideration of leisure meanings to include students’ perceptions. This article addresses the interdependent relationship between professors, students, and professionals. Students learn from professors and subsequently become professionals in the field. According to Parr and Lashua, the shaping of students’ understandings of leisure “will in turn have an effect on the future mission and goals of the professional of leisure services” (p. 17).

The purpose of much of the preceding and other research in the field is to determine what leisure means, how it is currently applied to practice, and how it can best be translated into practice. These studies lay a vital groundwork for shaping the field, but need to be taken further. Rather than seeking to understand rote definitions of terms in the field, research is needed to understand connotations and perceptions of those terms across different populations, especially populations outside of the field. Rather than focusing on those within the field (students, professors and practitioners), a need exists to further consider the connotations of the terms we use in light of the general public’s perceptions and understanding. As Sessoms (1986) stated, “Rather than chastise the public for its failure to understand the significance and importance of leisure, we should be developing data about a system that the public has come to accept as important” (p. 112).

Most people are able to provide a cursory definition of the words recreation, leisure, play, activities and sport. This research is not concerned with these typically standard/objective definitions, but seeks for a semantic or connotative understanding of the terms. When a given word is used in interpersonal communication, the sender and receiver may have

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drastically different experiences, values, cultural interpretations, opinions, attitudes and meanings regarding the word (Knapp & Daly, 2011; Clyne, 1999). Therefore, understanding others' perceptions is vital to communicating effectively. This project was designed to begin to investigate the subtle but powerful meanings, connotations and nuances of words commonly used within the profession to promote more effective communication.

## Methods

### Research Instrument Design

The semantic differential technique “has been used extensively in language attitude studies” (Martin & Hanington, 2012) since its development in the 1950s and is “one of the more commonly used scaling procedures in marketing research” (Sharpe & Anderson, 1972). Osgood’s seminal article summarized the semantic differential research conducted in the early 1950s (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957). The technique employs a series of opposing adverbs and/or adjectives to measure peoples’ attitudes and connotations related to specific objects, events and concepts. Over the past five decades, semantic differential scales have been used to measure attitudes and beliefs about a variety of objects and concepts. This includes tangible items such as automobiles (Hanss, Bohm, & Pfister, 2012), bras (Xue, Zhang, Ji, & Haruki, 2011), occupations (White & White, 2006), sports (Wankel & Sefton, 1989), celebrities (Choi & Rifin, 2007), and business practices (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Concepts ranging from clergy (Getz, Kirk, & Driscoll, 1999), to feminism (Pierce, Sydie, Stratkotter & Krull, 2003), to nations (Zevin & Corbin, 1998), have also been analyzed using semantic differential techniques.

Previous semantic differential research has demonstrated the existence of three domains or factors for nearly all words and concepts: evaluative (good/bad), potency (strong/weak), and activity (active/inactive). The three aspects—evaluative, potency, and activity (EPA)—are designed to measure affective meanings and attitudes. *Evaluative* answers determine respondents’ perceptions of how good or bad a term or word is, *potency* deals with perceptions of how powerful or weak it is, and *activity* corresponds to perceptions of liveliness versus passivity. For this project, data were subjected to internal and external comparisons to determine the perceptions of the five words within these three factors.

The initial task consisted of selecting the opposing adjective pairs from the thousands available for use in the construction of a seven-point semantic differential scale. After reviewing the literature on semantic differential scale development, techniques, and usage, and in consultation with academics and practitioners in the park and recreation field, the list was narrowed to 22 pairs of adjectives. These pairs were subjected to exploratory factor analysis, but most of the adjective pairs did not load on the dimensions as expected. Therefore, nine pairs (three for each dimension) that clearly and logically connected with the three dimensions were chosen as the focus of this study. Factor analysis revealed that the nine pairs have adequate to good loadings for the three dimensions (see Results section). All nine adjective pairs had been previously employed in various scholarly studies and were chosen because of their apparent relation to the terms being studied. Included among the pairs were the “pure” adjective pairs for the three consistent dimensions (i.e., evaluative [good–bad], potency [strong–weak] and activity [active–passive]).

To allow for comparisons across groups, the semantic differential scales were distributed in exactly the same manner and order to the three populations. The adjective pairs were also

listed in the same order to minimize the possibility that the groups of respondents might mark the survey in a systematically different manner. With regard to semantic differential research, one common assumption by researchers is that scale position preferences may create unwanted biases. Thus, there is a need for scales representing the same underlying factor to be alternated in direction of polarity (Osgood et al., 1957; Tull & Albaum, 1973). In this study three of the adjective pairs were reversed in terms of polarity in order to alleviate unwanted response bias.

While the semantic differential component of this study seeks insight into perceptions regarding the aforementioned words, it lacks context. The process and the results of the semantic differential items exist primarily on a theoretical level. Therefore, to understand these issues in a real-world context, six specific questions were asked of a sample of citizens. These questions were developed to solicit citizens' responses regarding practical questions using various recreation terms in a particular context. One set of questions was developed with the intent of determining whether it is better to use the term *recreation* or *leisure* to seek additional public funding. Similarly, various academic departmental names (using various terms from this study) were presented to citizens to determine which they felt was the most prestigious.

### Participants

An online survey was completed by 360 university students, 169 park and recreation professionals and 353 citizens. Student respondents tended to be upper division or graduate students with juniors comprising 22.2%, seniors comprising 26.3% and graduate students comprising 27.5% of the total student sample. Additionally, most of the professionals who responded to the survey were currently working in the park and recreation field (94.2%). Those not currently employed by a recreation agency were either retired or working in a different field; however, they had worked in the field and considered themselves professionals. Many of the professionals surveyed considered themselves to be in upper management positions (77.4%). As a group, the responding professionals worked an average of 17.8 years in the field with a standard deviation of 5.0 years.

The sample of citizens was large enough to be representative of the state's overall population. The state is nearly equal in terms of gender, consists of 78% of citizens who are White, 16.2% who are Hispanic, 14.8% who are African American and 4.8% who are Asian. Furthermore, 86% of citizens hold a high school diploma and 30% hold bachelors degrees or higher. The per capita income is \$28,782 (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts). It is important to note that educational levels and per capita income were slightly higher and age slightly lower for survey respondents when compared with the overall population of the state (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts). Otherwise the citizen respondents to the survey align with the aforementioned demographics of the state.

Among the 882 returned surveys, 132 respondents did not complete the leisure adjective pairs, 192 did not complete the recreation adjective pairs, 204 did not complete the play adjective pairs, 221 did not complete the activity adjective pairs, and 229 did not complete the sport adjective pairs. Most of the missing data were from university students and no missing data were found for citizens. Respondents who did not complete any of the leisure, recreation, play, activity or sport opposing adjective pairs were removed from further analysis. After the deletion, random missing data were scattered across items. These missing responses were replaced with respective group means of the survey items because the percent missing was less than 1% of the total responses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The

final data used for analysis included responses from 138 park and recreation professionals, 353 citizens, and 162 university students (653 of the original 882 respondents), representing a completion rate of 74%.

### Data Collection and Analysis

All responses were collected electronically via an online survey. Survey Sampling International was used to obtain information from a random sample of the state's citizens. In addition, students at a Midwestern university participated via an online survey service offered by the university. Finally, park and recreation professionals were selected from a Midwestern state's park and recreation association database and participated in the same online survey system.

Data from the three groups were entered, screened and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0). This research involved three different groups of participants and three factors for the five words. The analysis consisted of several stages. First, factor analysis was conducted to examine if the adjective pairs were good indicators of the EPA dimension. Second, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach coefficient alpha for each dimension across all five words. Then, aggregated factor scores were compared within and across groups using factorial ANOVA. Finally, descriptive statistics of the specific/applied questions were generated.

## Results

### Factor Analysis

Three adjective pairs were identified to represent each dimension (evaluative, potency, and activity) of a word, based on prior semantic differential research, serious consideration and factor loadings. As indicated via asterisk in Table 1, one of the adjective pairs for each factor is the same adjective pair that is generally used in semantic differential research to describe the evaluative, potency and activity factors.

**Table 1**

*Adjective Pairs for Evaluative, Potency, and Activity Factors*

<b>Evaluative Factor (Good - Bad)</b>	<b>Potency factor (Strong - Weak)</b>	<b>Activity Factor (Active - Passive)</b>
*Good - Bad	*Strong - Weak	*Active - Passive
Positive - Negative	Valuable - Worthless	Fast - Slow
Necessary - Unnecessary	Meaningful - Meaningless	Young - Old

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed on opposing adjective pairs pertaining to each factor. Within each factor, one adjective pair was worded with a reversed polarity. Thus, these three items were subsequently reverse coded before being included in the factor analysis. Factor loadings are provided in Table 2.

Examination of the data (see Table 2) revealed that all nine adjective pairs had factor loadings greater than .70 except for the old-new adjective pairs from the activity dimension. Factor loadings for the old-new adjective pairs were not as high as the other adjective pairs, but all were greater than .45 except for the old-new adjective pair that measures the activity dimension of the word "sport."

**Table 2**

*Factor Loadings for Leisure, Recreation, Play, Activity, and Sport*

Factor	Item	Factor Loading				
		Leisure	Recreation	Play	Activity	Sport
Evaluation	positive - negative	.88	.89	.90	.90	.89
	unnecessary - necessary*	.80	.79	.78	.82	.81
	good - bad	.91	.89	.89	.89	.90
Potency	valuable - worthless	.84	.85	.87	.87	.89
	meaningless - meaningful*	.84	.82	.82	.83	.84
	strong - weak	.80	.73	.74	.77	.81
Activity	active - passive	.84	.84	.80	.77	.86
	fast - slow	.80	.82	.80	.84	.88
	old - new*	.67	.48	.50	.56	.21

\*reverse-coded item

According to Stevens (2009), the significance of a factor loading depends on sample size. For a sample size of 600, a loading with absolute value greater than .21 can be considered significant. Although practical significance needs to be considered in conjunction with statistical significance, the purpose of the factor analysis in this study is to confirm the placement of opposing adjective pairs to each of the three dimensions or factors. Regarding all five words, each dimension (or factor) explained 51% to 75% of the total variance, providing reasonable to strong support that the adjective pairs represent the dimensions.

### Reliability Analysis

Reliability of the EPA (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity) dimensions was assessed using Cronbach coefficient alpha (see Table 3). Examination of the results indicates that the evaluation and potency dimension for all five words have Cronbach coefficient alpha ranging from .71 to .84, representing good internal consistency (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994). However, internal consistency measures for the activity dimension were not as high as with the other two dimensions. Subsequent analyses were carried out with the three dimensions, but caution is advised regarding interpretations with the activity dimension.

### Semantic Differential Item Comparisons

Following the reliability analysis, the adjective pairs for each dimension were combined and an aggregated dimension/factor score was created for each word. This was done with all five words, resulting in a total of 15 (five words  $\times$  three factors) sets of scores for each of the survey groups. Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations for each word and factor combination by survey respondent group.

**Table 3***Cronback Alpha for the Evaluation, Potency, Activity Dimension by Word (n=653)*

Word/Factor	Evaluation	Potency	Activity
Leisure	.82	.77	.66
Recreation	.81	.71	.56
Play	.81	.73	.50
Activity	.84	.76	.56
Sport	.83	.80	.47

**Table 4***Means and Standard Deviations for Leisure, Recreation, Play, Activity, and Sport by Factor and Group (Rescaled Factor Score)*

Factor	Group	N	Leisure		Recreation		Play		Activity		Sport	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Evaluation	Professional	138	5.82	1.24	6.27	.74	6.31	.73	5.46	1.06	5.56	1.00
	Citizen	353	5.77	1.15	5.63	1.14	5.59	1.20	5.32	1.25	5.10	1.27
	Student	162	6.19	.95	5.96	.98	6.04	1.03	5.52	1.14	5.28	1.31
Potency	Professional	138	5.29	1.27	5.96	.74	5.67	.93	5.34	.95	5.78	.86
	Citizen	353	5.41	1.18	5.39	1.09	5.33	1.14	5.18	1.19	5.16	1.23
	Student	162	5.45	1.12	5.71	.90	5.44	1.05	5.28	1.04	5.58	1.15
Activity	Professional	138	3.71	1.12	5.00	.78	4.96	.86	4.73	.81	5.47	.70
	Citizen	353	4.30	1.18	4.71	1.03	4.82	1.01	4.79	1.02	4.94	1.01
	Student	162	3.85	1.08	5.11	.84	4.93	.86	4.74	.90	5.44	.73

Factorial ANOVA (3x5x3) with one between-subjects variable (group) and two within-subjects variables (Word and Factor) were carried out for comparisons (see Table 5). This analysis suggests that all main and interaction effects were significant at  $p < .001$ . There was a significant main effect of word on rating differences [ $F(4, 2600) = 56.26, p < .001$ ]. Pairwise comparisons reveal that the difference was largely due to rating differences between the words *leisure* and *recreation*. With only a limited number of exceptions, ratings for *recreation* were considerably higher than ratings for *leisure* along all three EPA dimensions, suggesting people tended to perceive *recreation* as better, more powerful and more active than *leisure*.

A significant main effect of group on rating differences was also found [ $F(2, 650) = 8.13, p < .001$ ]. This indicates that different groups, professionals, citizens, and students, perceived the five words differently. Post hoc tests reveal that citizens tend to give significantly lower ratings than either professionals or students for most words on the EPA dimensions.

There was also a significant interaction effect between respondent groups and the EPA dimensions [ $F(4, 1300) = 8.36, p < .001$ ]. Citizens perceive all words less "good" and less "potent" than do professionals and students. The results are mixed for the words on the activity dimension, with citizens perceiving *leisure* as more active than either professionals or students.

A significant interaction effect was found between respondent groups and the five words [ $F(8, 2600) = 15.40, p < .001$ ]. Professionals in the field of park and recreation usually gave the highest ratings along all three dimensions for the five words except for the word *leisure*. In contrast, students and citizens had more positive associations of *leisure* than professionals regardless of the EPA dimensions.

The ANOVA results further indicate a significant interaction effect between the EPA dimensions and the five words, [ $F(8,2600) = 210.76, p < .001$ ]. Along the evaluation dimension, all three groups tended to give higher ratings to the words *leisure*, *recreation* and *play* than they did for the words *sport* and *activity*, suggesting that people had more positive associations of *leisure*, *recreation* and *play* than with either *sport* or *activity*. Along the activity dimension, all groups tended to give lower ratings to *leisure* than the other words.

Irrespective of participant group, perceptions of the five words fall on different EPA dimensions. *Leisure*, *recreation*, and *play* were rated higher on the evaluation and potency dimensions, but lower on the activity dimension, whereas *sport* was rated higher on both potency and activity dimensions. This illustrates that people generally perceive *leisure*, *recreation*, and *play* as being good and powerful, but not particularly active and that they perceive *sport* to be powerful and active.

There was a significant interaction between the EPA dimensions, the five words, and the respondent groups (word x factor x group) [ $F(16, 5200) = 10.37, p < .001$ ]. This indicates that although people generally perceive *leisure*, *recreation*, and *play* as being good and powerful and that they perceive *sport* to be powerful and active, their perceptions differ among respondent groups. Professionals have more positive associations with the term *recreation* than either citizens or students since they gave much higher ratings than either citizens or students on both evaluative and potency dimensions for the word *recreation*. In contrast, students had more positive associations regarding the word *leisure* than either professionals or citizens on the evaluative dimension. Citizens also perceive *leisure*, *recreation* and *play* as being good and powerful, but these three words evoke substantially less differences along the evaluative or potent dimension than they do for professionals or students.

**Table 5**

*Analysis of Variance Results for Group, Term, and Factor*

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between subjects				
Group	2	131.23	65.61	8.13***
Error 1	650	5245.17	8.07	
Within subjects				
Term	4	240.29	60.07	56.26***
Term x Group	8	131.57	16.45	15.40***
Error 2	2600	2775.95	1.07	
Factor	2	1349.42	674.71	645.47***
Factor x Group	4	34.95	8.74	8.36***
Error 3	1300	1358.89	1.05	
Term x Factor	8	580.04	72.76	210.76***
Term x Factor x Group	16	57.26	3.58	10.37***
Error 4	5200	1795.07	.35	

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Citizen Results for Applied Questions

Citizen respondents (N=353) were asked if it was acceptable for tax money to be spent to provide *recreation* or to provide *leisure* for citizens respectively (see Table 6). Significantly more respondents (63.7%) either strongly agreed with or agreed with taxes being spent on providing *recreation* than were in agreement that tax dollars should go toward providing *leisure* for citizens (50.7%). Further, nearly twice as many citizens (8.5%) strongly disagreed that public money should be spent on *leisure* than strongly disagreed that public money should be spent on *recreation* for citizens (4.5%).

**Table 6**

*It is Acceptable for Tax Money to be Spent to Provide Recreation for Citizens*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	59	16.7
Agree	166	47.0
Undecided	72	20.4
Disagree	40	11.3
Strongly Disagree	16	4.5

*It is Acceptable for Tax Money to be Spent to Provide Leisure for Citizens*

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	49	13.9
Agree	130	36.8
Undecided	93	26.3
Disagree	51	14.4
Strongly Disagree	30	8.5

After questioning citizens about taxes in relation to given words, respondents were asked to indicate which of four generic university departmental names (which included words from the study) was the most prestigious (see Table 7). Almost half (48.7%) indicated that the *Department of Parks and Recreation Administration* was most prestigious. The *Department of Parks and Recreation Studies* was perceived as the second most prestigious (36.8%). Finally, the *Department of Leisure Studies* and *Department of Play Studies* finished a distant third and fourth with 12.2% and 2.3% respectively.

Citizens were also asked questions to help determine the public's support of university departments devoted to the study of recreation, leisure and play. As indicated in Table 8, fewer than half of the citizen respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it was appropriate for a university to study such topics. Support (strongly agree or agree) for university departments devoted to studying recreation was 45.9%, for studying leisure was 39.4% and for the study of play was 34.8%.

**Table 7**

*Select the University Academic Departmental Name that You Think Has the Most Prestige*

<b>Proposed Departmental Name</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Department of Parks and Recreation Studies	130	36.8
Department of Leisure Studies	43	12.2
Department of Parks and Recreation Administration	172	48.7
Department of Play Studies	8	2.3

**Table 8**

*It is Appropriate for a University to Have a Department Devoted to the Study of Recreation*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly agree	41	11.6
Agree	121	34.3
Undecided	105	29.7
Disagree	53	15.0
Strongly Disagree	33	9.3

*It is Appropriate for a University to Have a Department Devoted to the Study of Leisure*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly agree	40	11.3
Agree	99	28.0
Undecided	112	31.7
Disagree	62	17.6
Strongly Disagree	40	11.3

*It is Appropriate for a University to Have a Department Devoted to the Study of Play*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly agree	31	8.8
Agree	92	26.1
Undecided	120	34.0
Disagree	72	20.4
Strongly Disagree	38	10.8

## Discussion

### Semantic Differential

Fifty years of semantic differential research has demonstrated that nearly every concept has three primary factors: evaluative (good–bad), potency (strong–weak), and activity (active–passive), and all five of the words used in this study aligned with these three factors. Whether consciously or subconsciously, people think of the concepts of *leisure*, *recreation*, *play*, *activity*, and *sport* existing on continuums of good or bad, strong or weak, and active or passive.

With a limited number of exceptions, evaluative, potency, and activity ratings for *recreation* are considerably higher than ratings for *leisure* across populations. Said differently, the term recreation is seen as more good, more strong, and more active than leisure. Therefore, the results of this research indicate that the use of the term leisure, might prove problematic for students, professionals, and academics due to the negative connotations or perceptions underlying the word.

Regardless of words (concepts) or factors, professionals, citizens, and students gave significantly different ratings. Post hoc tests (Games-Howell) reveal that citizens tend to give significantly lower ratings than either professionals or university students. For example, citizens perceive all words less “good” and less potent than do professionals and students. The results are mixed for the words on the activity scale. Professionals in the field of park and recreation usually gave the highest ratings on the three factors for all words except for the word *leisure*. Students gave a much higher rating than either professionals or citizens on the evaluative factor for the word *leisure*.

The lower ratings provided by citizens are understandable considering the groups’ characteristics. Unlike park and recreation professionals, the sample of citizens represents no single vocation. Further, the citizens in the sample were not as young and educated as college students. Younger people and people with more formal education tend to accept the role that recreation, leisure, and play have in peoples’ lives. Furthermore, students are typically consumers of recreation services and may not have had to pay for such services. It is generally parents and employed adults in a community who fund recreational services, sometimes without direct benefits. Thus, it is conceivable that having to carry the burden of paying for these services could diminish some of the enthusiasm citizens have for these concepts.

It is not surprising that administrators in the field of park and recreation give higher ratings on almost all words on almost all factors. This is their chosen profession and they most likely believe in the value of the services and products they offer. Those who earned academic degrees have learned the importance of these activities both inside and outside of the classroom. These initial perspectives about recreation and leisure are likely reinforced through a tendency of conformity. If the vast majority of people in a group feel a particular way, those who hold opposing views may modify their stance. This does not necessarily involve coercion; rather it is an instinctive behavior that influences thinking and acting regardless of settings, participants and topics. Such reinforcement may be especially powerful in certain professions (including the park and recreation field) where group members associate primarily with other like-minded individuals.

Professionals’ ratings on the evaluative (good–bad) factor for *recreation* and *play* are the highest ratings in the entire study. The ratings on the potency and activity factors are also

quite high for the concept of *recreation*. Professionals are involved with providing formal recreation activities that are planned, structured and evaluated. Thus, while some groups might think of structured activities in terms of leisure, park and recreation professionals are unlikely to do so, resulting in the lower ratings on the concept of leisure.

### Questions Related to Park and Recreation Agencies and Universities

Over half of the citizen respondents indicated that it is acceptable for tax dollars to be spent on *recreation* and/or *leisure*. However, support for tax money expenditures to provide *recreation* is much stronger (63.7% strongly agree or agree) than that for spending tax dollars to provide *leisure* services (50.7% strongly agree or agree). It appears that agencies may be able to use the words *recreation* and *leisure* to advertise their programs with equal results. However, this may not be the case when asking for financial support. Here the public is significantly more in favor of financial support for *recreation* than for *leisure*. Bolstering that position is the fact that nearly twice as many citizens are strongly opposed to having tax dollars spent on *leisure* activities than on *recreation* activities for the public.

The name of an academic department makes a difference for those in higher education as well. Departments of *Leisure Studies* or *Play Studies* may have little prestige in the eyes of the public, whereas departments with the word *recreation* have significantly more prestige in this study. In addition, it is interesting to note the influence of the word *administration*. Given two department names (*Department of Parks and Recreation Studies* or *Department of Parks and Recreation Administration*) the public assigns significantly more prestige to the name which includes *administration*. While the results of this question are illuminating, further semantic differential research is needed to incorporate the findings of this project. It would be beneficial to use semantic differential techniques to examine current departmental names in the field.

Future studies could address some of the unexpected results from this study that may be as informative or even more enlightening than that for which the project was originally designed. This research indicated that a large percentage of the respondents in this Midwestern state are unconvinced that the study of recreation, leisure, and play is worthy of diminishing academic resources. In response to the statement, "It is appropriate for a university to have a department devoted to the study of play," two thirds (66.2%) of the citizens queried were either undecided, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement. The results were only slightly more encouraging when respondents were asked about the appropriateness of studying leisure, with 60.6% either undecided, disagreeing, or strongly disagreeing. The study of recreation received the highest ratings for being an appropriate area of academia, but over half (54.0%) were unconvinced that it is appropriate. In terms of the worthiness of a department to study recreation, 29.7% were undecided, 15.0% were opposed, and 9.3% were strongly opposed. Therefore, the majority of the citizens in this survey doubt the value of academic attention for recreation, leisure, and play.

### Conclusion

Has the public's perceived value of recreation, leisure, and play changed over the past several decades? It may be that the American public has never perceived higher education programs dedicated to recreation and leisure worthy of inclusion in a college education, but we may never know since research in the field has largely ignored the perceptions of the general population. Perhaps the current economic climate and a corresponding reduction in

higher education funding have simply moved this ongoing issue to the forefront. Regardless of the history or genesis of the issue, the apparent low value citizens in this study have for the study of recreation and leisure has major implications for the future of the field and for service providers.

To reiterate, Sessoms (1986) admonished, "Rather than chastise the public for its failure to understand the significance and importance of leisure, we should be developing data about a system that the public has come to accept as important." In the 1990s, NRPA's "The Benefits are Endless" campaign sought to raise awareness for the field and shape how the field is perceived. Further, the 2014 NRPA Congress focused on the identity of the field, marketing in the field and positioning the field around the three pillars of conservation, health and wellness, and social equity (NRPA website). These campaigns constitute a national effort to influence the repositioning of the recreation field. Perhaps this and future research will spur changes in the terms we use to market and educate external constituencies. More research is needed to develop appropriate terms to rebrand the field as has been done with Kinesiology, Consumer Sciences, etc.

The results of this research suggest that the public may be more in favor of the actual delivery of programs and facilities than the preparation of professionals who make these same programs and facilities possible. Of course, citizens see swimming pools and playgrounds, they watch their children and grandchildren play ball and dance and they walk in the parks and open spaces. There is little concern about how all of these recreational opportunities come about because that process is less tangible and too far removed. Thus, it is apparent that the recreation field needs to carefully consider the terms it uses to communicate with the general public, consider how to increase the prestige of the field and consider how to better educate external constituencies about the importance of the field.

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