

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE, PART I

**Why There is a Need to Discuss the Gap
between Research and Practice**

Guest Editors

Michael J. Bradley
Eastern Kentucky University**Ryan L. Sharp**
Kansas State University

During the Fall 2015 semester, a good amount of discussion among those within academia was related to the new format and guidelines for submitting research presentations to the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) annual congress. Without taking a stance or giving merit to any aspect of the discussions that took place, it is important to note the concern from the professional association that changes were necessary to engage non-academic professionals in sessions presented at their events. The matter to be discussed is that practitioners are not attending research sessions at conference at the necessary levels. Inquiries will most likely lead to varied opinions as to why this is, and other inquiries may lead to calls for significant changes. These changes do highlight something quite specific: The practitioners are not attending research sessions, perhaps creating a divide between professionals working in the field and professionals facilitating research and preparing students for the field. Alternately, perhaps the academic community does not engage in many of the practitioner presentations that often have a very focused spotlight on day-to-day operations of parks. What is clear is this: what many consider to be the major governing body for parks and recreation professionals (including academics and practitioners) is asking how to better engage people of all backgrounds.

We had the idea for this special issue before the proposed change to the research presentations at NRPA, and this only served to highlight the need for this discussion. What is the role of academics in the training of future parks and recreation professionals? What is the role of academics in creating knowledge for practical use at the park level? What is the role of park and recreation agencies in engaging academia about what their needs and desires might be? What level of responsibility do park and recreation agencies have in hiring qualified employees with training from an accredited university? Where does the gap exist between practitioner and academic? Does the gap exist or is an artificial divide? These are all questions we challenged the park and recreation community to ponder.

Michael J. Bradley is an assistant professor in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at Eastern Kentucky University. **Ryan L. Sharp** is an assistant professor in the Horticulture, Forestry and Recreation Resources Department at Kansas State University. Please send correspondence to Michael J. Bradley, michael.bradley@eku.edu

Throughout the process of developing this special issue, we may have uncovered a major divide between practitioner and academic motivations. We had hoped to invite academics and practitioners to contribute to the special issue, but what we found is that academics were happy to contribute, but practitioners were unable to (at least the ones we contacted). This may come down to simple motivations and responsibilities. Academics are rewarded by writing papers in peer-reviewed journals and often read publications to understand the state of their field of interest. However, practitioners' desire to publish may be more internally driven and not be supported by extrinsic rewards. Also, for practitioners, writing papers and reading journal articles may fall under "other duties as assigned," or may not be a part of their professional lives at all. We were unable to find a practitioner who had the time and/or motivation to contribute. We recognize that we did not contact everyone and that there are certainly people who would like to contribute to this discussion, but our inability to find a practitioner-based contributor is reason for concern.

All recreation professionals work toward the goal of including recreation as an integral part of peoples' lives. While various obligations add other goals and metrics to our job responsibilities, a common tenet is one of providing recreation to enhance the lives of others. With a common goal, various professionals can begin working together to ensure broad goals are met and specific goals are explored. Each professional and professional role has a lot to offer others in the field. We feel it is the responsibility of all engaged, in one way or another in the parks and recreation field, to be an active member of that community. Can academics be more involved in helping solve on-the-ground issues for practitioners? Absolutely. Can practitioners be more involved in the research discussion about moving the profession forward? Absolutely. There is a disconnect—it may be minor, it may be overblown—but there seems to be a gap. How do we elevate ourselves as a profession if we are not interested in engaging in serious conversations about our legitimacy or our future? Hopefully through this special issue we can begin to attempt to bridge the gap between the worlds of academia and practitioner. Perhaps it is time for an honest and open dialogue about what might be holding us back so that we may move forward together.

We are excited to report that this topic elicited much attention and discussion, and we are proud to notify readers that this is the first of two special issues of *Schole* related to practitioner and academic engagement. We encourage all readers to process the information, and open a dialogue with colleagues on the topics presented in these pages.