

## Preparing for the Profession

### *Practitioner Perceptions of College Student Preparedness for Entry-Level, Full-Time Employment in Municipal Recreation Agencies*

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### Abstract

Are recent graduates with degrees in parks and recreation adequately prepared to secure full-time employment in municipal recreation? To answer this question, California Parks and Recreation Society members with position titles such as supervisor, manager, director and superintendent ( $n=206$ ) were asked: How can recent college graduates be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation agencies? Data were collected electronically and analyzed using thematic reduction. Three main themes were present in the data including experience, interview skills, and job awareness. The implications of these results are presented, including suggestions for how university programs can bridge the gap between academic preparation and the competencies employers most desire.

**Keywords:** *Job competencies, academic preparation, parks and recreation*

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## Introduction

Preparing students for entry-level, full-time employment is a major goal for recreation, parks, tourism, and related higher education programs. Since their inception, parks and recreation degree programs have been in a state of transition. In a recent discussion about the history and evolution of degree programs related to parks and recreation employment, Beard (2011) interviewed several scholars. According to those interviewed, university degree programs related to public parks and recreation emerged in the late 1940s and experienced substantial growth until the late 1970s when a bill limiting property taxes passed in California. Proposition 13, also referred to as “The People’s Initiative to Limit Property Taxation bill of 1978,” had long-lasting negative impacts on funding and employment in municipal recreation nationwide.

As employment prospects in municipal recreation dwindled, so did student interest in parks and recreation programs. As a result, many university departments were forced to shift to more specialized degree options to attract students. The rise of specializations such as tourism and sports management led Dustin and Schwab (2011) to question the benefits of specialization within the profession, warning that this trend could fragment degree programs and further reduce the quantity of prospective municipal recreation students. However, Beard (2011) argued that specializations are good for degree programs, stating that the potential increase in students could be good for a department. The extent to which the shift toward specialization has benefited parks and recreation degree programs and their students remains unclear. According to the United States Department of Education (2015), parks and recreation degree programs have experienced substantial growth, reporting a 42% increase in the number of conferred degrees in the field of parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness between 2006–2007 and 2011–2012. Yet, how effective are these programs in preparing students to secure gainful employment and successfully work in municipal recreation? With more diverse concentrations and emphasis areas within degree programs, and a shift away from a generalist track, it is increasingly important to identify the extent to which graduates with degrees in recreation are prepared to work in municipal settings.

Historically, a bachelor’s degree from an accredited university, along with some practical experience, was considered a graduate’s ticket to gainful employment. Recent discussions about the value of a college degree have suggested this is no longer the case (Bartram, 2014). Managers of municipal recreation programs who make entry-level employment decisions are looking for the complete package. Hiring managers are looking beyond a degree and demand job candidates possess an array of characteristics and skills, many of which are not directly addressed by college degree programs. For example, recent evidence on competencies for entry-level full time employment in municipal recreation agencies suggests managers seek job skills related to personality factors such as creativity, enthusiasm, and flexibility (Hurd, 2005; Chase & Masberg, 2008). While recreation degree programs excel at teaching students foundational content such as leisure theory and program service delivery, we do not know the extent to which these programs teach students how to emulate the personality characteristics employers desire. The research on job competencies in municipal recreation calls into question the efficacy of park and recreation degree programs to prepare graduates for full time employment.

How people define and operationalize preparedness for employment is context specific, further complicating the issue of how to best prepare students in park and recreation degree programs for employment in municipal recreation. Professional preparation for municipal

recreation employment has traditionally come from three areas: work experience in the field, university degrees in recreation, and university degrees in recreation-related majors (such as education, health, physical education, dance, arts, or other social science degrees). University educators and municipal parks and recreation managers seem to have different foci when it comes to determining whether an individual is adequately prepared to enter the workforce. Academics emphasize the importance of attaining a college degree from an accredited program where curriculum and learning outcomes focus on leisure theory, programming, budgeting, and evaluation. Managers, on the other hand, emphasize a combination of specific job-level competencies (e.g., ethical decision-making skills, creativity, interpersonal skills, and enthusiasm) and professional experience within the field as key determinants of preparedness (Fulthorp & D'Eloia, 2015). While there are similarities between the knowledge and skills students acquire at an accredited degree program and the specific job competencies employers desire, there are still many discrepancies. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify, from the viewpoint of managers responsible for making hiring decisions, how recent college graduates can be better prepared for entry-level full time employment in municipal recreation.

### **Preparing for the Profession: Academic Training vs. Job Skills**

For many academics, accreditation is the hallmark of how educators determine the extent to which programs properly prepare their students. The Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT) is the professional body that governs the accreditation process for university programs that offer degrees in Parks, Recreation and Tourism. While not all universities with park and recreation programs are accredited, standards for accreditation present clear guidelines for how university educators make curriculum decisions and ultimately prepare students to enter the profession. With an emphasis on learning outcomes, COAPRT identifies three general content areas that university curriculum must address if they want to become accredited (National Park Association, 2014). These content areas include foundations (e.g., history, philosophy, and theoretical underpinnings, etc.), service provision (e.g., programming, evaluation, leadership, site design, etc.), and management and administration (e.g., management theory, operations, strategic planning, etc.). Accredited programs must also provide a culminating internship. Academic internships provide students the opportunity to bridge theory to practice and apply knowledge from the classroom environment in real-world settings. Most internships occur at the end of the students academic training with the assumption that students will be adequately prepared and trained post internship to enter the workforce. Despite these efforts, many students feel underprepared for their first job, often because the job specific skills employers in municipal recreation desire are not always made clear (Hurd & Schlatter, 2007; Woods & Goc-Karp, 1997).

For most managers who make entry-level employment decisions, foundational knowledge is simply not enough. Making entry-level employment decisions is a multifaceted and complex process involving a multitude of factors, including specific job competencies, work experience, educational background, and a candidate's overall fit within an agency (Edington, Hudson, Lankford, & Larson, 2008). Research on entry-level job skills (Hurd, 2005) and on how entry-level employment decisions are made (e.g., Fulthorp & D'Eloia, 2015) points to job competencies as a prominent defining characteristic of professional preparedness. Competencies are the "essential skills, knowledge, abilities and personal characteristics needed for effective job performance (Hurd, 2005, p. 46)," and include skills

such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, professional knowledge, technical skills, and inclusion skills. While many studies have identified job-specific competencies within municipal recreation (e.g., Busser & Bannon, 1987; Smale & Frisby, 1992; Chase & Masberg, 2008; Hurd, 2005; Fulthorp & D'Eloia, 2015), there is very little agreement regarding the number or type of competencies deemed essential for job and employment success.

Recently, Fulthorp and D'Eloia (2015) examined the importance of job competencies for employment in municipal recreation settings utilizing a competency framework adapted from Hurd (2005). Managers responsible for entry-level hiring decisions were asked to rate competencies in order of perceived importance for making these decisions. The authors found that most of the top 10 highest rated competencies were related to interpersonal and communication skills (see Table 1). The ability to make ethical decisions was the highest rated competency. Ethical decision making skills may be addressed through curriculum. For example, educators may include content related to ethical decision making in a general recreation education program as part of a traditional legal issues or risk management program curriculum. The remainder of the highest rated competencies are less directly related to curriculum and represent skills that students may, or may not acquire in recreation degree programs such as interpersonal and communication skills (communicating with, listening to, and dealing with staff and customers), being enthusiastic and having a positive attitude, and teamwork skills. Of the additional 58 competencies related to professional practice, inclusion, technology, community relations, management, and leadership skills included in the Fulthorp & Deloia (2015) study, all but one was rated above a 3.0 on a 5.0 scale, suggesting that managers found all of these competencies important when making hiring decisions. Yet, it is still unclear the extent to which recreation degree programs are producing graduates with enough mastery in these competencies to get hired.

**Table 1**

*Top 10 Highest Rated Entry-Level Job Competencies*

Competency	Mean	S.D.
1. Ability to make ethical decisions	4.58	.697
2. Knows how to act professionally	4.50	.730
3. Ability to work well with people	4.47	.669
4. Ability to clearly communicate with customers	4.39	.830
5. Have the ability to deal with the public	4.38	.778
6. Have the ability to listen to staff and customers	4.36	.794
7. Be enthusiastic and have a positive attitude	4.36	.711
8. Ability to clearly communicate with staff	4.35	.820
9. Demonstrates openness to serving all members of the community	4.31	.829
10. Ability to work in team environments	4.26	.787

*Note:* Adapted from Fulthorp, K., & D'Eloia, M. H. (2015). Managers' perceptions of entry-level job competencies when making hiring decisions for municipal recreation agencies. *Journal of Park And Recreation Administration*, 33(1), 57–71.

Furthermore, an emphasis on competencies may not consider other factors that employers take into account when making employment decisions such as person-environment fit, interviewing skills, and academic preparation. Research on hiring practices in municipal recreation is limited, and very little is known about which factors (e.g., academic preparation, work experience, or job competencies) managers in these settings deem most important when determining whether a student is adequately prepared for employment. Research on what constitutes a well-prepared college graduate from the perspective of employers in municipal parks and recreation agencies is in its infancy. To date, there has been very little investigation on what it means to be prepared for employment from the employer's point of view. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify, from the viewpoint of managers responsible for making hiring decisions, how recent college graduates can be better prepared for entry-level full-time employment in municipal recreation.

## Methods

The following project was completed in partnership with the California Park and Recreation Society (CPRS) and was connected to a larger study that asked managers who make entry-level employment decisions for municipal recreation agencies to rate competencies based on their perceived importance when making hiring decisions. The previous study used a mixed-methods approach where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data were collected using an adapted version of the Entry-Level Competence Framework (Hurd, 2005) and qualitative data were collected using a single open-ended question designed to answer the following research question: How can recent college graduates be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation? The present study focuses on the qualitative data. For the results and complete details of the quantitative investigation, please refer to Fulthorp and D'Eloia (2015).

### Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

The present study utilized a convenience sample that included CPRS members with position titles such as supervisor, manager, director or superintendent. These position titles were selected to ensure access to agency employees who are generally involved in making hiring decisions regarding entry-level, full-time employees. Data were collected using an electronic survey. This survey was disseminated electronically through CPRS, reaching a total of 1500 CPRS members. This survey included the adapted version of the ELCF, a brief demographic survey (e.g., geographic location of work environment, position title, length of time in the field, education level, and degree title), and two additional questions: 1) "Have you recently interviewed a college graduate for an entry-level position"; and 2) "How can recent college graduates be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation agencies?" Respondents who answered yes to the first question were included in the study and those respondents who answered "no" to the first question were excluded from the study.

### Data Analysis

Responses from the question "How can recent college graduates be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation agencies?" were analyzed using thematic reduction, a qualitative analysis strategy consistent with research that

is primarily descriptive in nature (Given, 2008). Thematic analysis is a data reduction technique where data are segmented, categorized, and summarized to represent the central concepts reported within a qualitative data set (Cresswell, 2007). Using this technique, each researcher independently read and re-read the data to code and identify initial broad themes. Once coded, the researchers met to compare their results and come to agreement. When discrepancies in coding occurred, the researchers would discuss the theme and come to consensus. Once themes and codes were solidified, the researchers returned to the data to apply the codes and identify key phrases that represent and describe each theme.

## Results

A total of 423 CPRS members responded to the survey. Of those, 206 answered “yes” to the question, “Have you recently interviewed a college graduate for an entry-level position?” and were included in this study. As can be seen in Table 2, a majority of the respondents in this study worked in suburban settings (63.6%), had a bachelor’s degree or

**Table 2**  
*Characteristics of Respondents*

Sample Characteristics	N	%
<b>Length of time in Profession</b>	19	9.2
0-10 years	37	18
11-15 years	34	16.5
16-20 years	116	56.3
Over 21 years	206	100
Total		
<b>Location</b>	20	9.7
Rural	131	63.6
Suburban	55	26.7
Urban	206	100
Total		
<b>Education</b>	2	1
High School	6	2.9
Associate’s Degree	122	59.2
Bachelor’s Degree	76	36.9
Master’s Degree	206	100
Total		
<b>Major in College</b>	104	50.5
Parks/Rec/Tourism	19	9.2
Exercise/Sport Science/PE	11	5.3
Business	8	3.9
Public Administration	3	1.5
Communication	54	26.2
Other*	206	100
Total		
<b>Importance of Rec Degree</b>	151	73.3
Would hire without	53	25.7
Would not hire without	2	1
Missing	204	100
Total		

Note: \*Other includes degrees such as psychology, sociology, landscape architecture, education, anthropology, etc. These were mostly social science-related degrees.

higher (bachelor's degree = 59.2% and master's degree = 36.9%), and have worked in the field for 21 years or more (56.3%). Half of the respondents (50.3%) indicated earning at least one degree in Parks, Recreation and Tourism where the other half indicated earning a degree in another discipline.

Three distinct themes related to how college students can be better prepared for employment in municipal recreation settings were present in the data: Experience (recreation related), interview skills (self-presentation, oral and written communication skills), and job awareness (agency, community, and position specifics and expectations). These themes are discussed below.

## **Experience**

Experience was the strongest theme to emerge and was mentioned by 90% of the respondents. The amount and quality of practical experience was a central determinant to whether the participants in this study would hire them for an entry-level position. For example, one respondents stated: "The key to my interest in them, and their ultimate success is their past experience and success in the field at a similar or lower level. There is too much to learn about the real world, that you just can't get without that experience." Multiple respondents in this study explained that experience could be acquired through volunteering, internships, or part or full-time employment. "Get experience! The best applicants I've seen have had some form of experience in recreation, whether it be through an internship, employment, or volunteer opportunity." Respondents also emphasized the importance of students seeking work experience while they are in school and saw part-time work or even volunteer experiences as valuable ways to gain professional experience. Another respondents wrote, "Have experience as a part-time recreation staff while in college; prior to being a college graduate."

Managers desire applicants with experience related to the field of parks and recreation, and prefer a wide range of experiences such as working with various populations and settings. For example, when determining which applicants to hire, one respondent wrote that students should:

Seek and acquire a wide variety of experiences such as working with children, adults and seniors in a variety of recreational settings; work with diverse cultural and underserved populations; and voluntarily engage in collaborative cross-discipline initiatives, such as health-focused projects or drug and alcohol prevention coalitions, and gain experience in the maintenance, operation, and sustainability of facilities and resources.

In addition to work experience within the profession, respondents indicated students should intentionally use experience to expand and foster skill development. These skills include (but are not limited to) budget and finance, event planning, staffing supervision and training, as well as marketing. One respondent wrote, "I think some practical skills would be helpful; things like all that is involved with putting on a special event: ordering food, tickets, facility issues, etc." Another respondent expanded upon this viewpoint and specified the types of skills applicants should develop through their experience. "Having a breadth of varying experiences related to the position (volunteer and paid); clear understanding of effective programming and evaluation; ability to use technology to be more efficient at what they do; marketing and communication best practices." According to some of the respondents in this study, work experience should be used as a means of self-development.

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Another respondent wrote:

If they already have part-time experience or are already working part-time, they should volunteer for more leadership positions and continue to challenge themselves with leading a segment of a program, event, or league because they will be responsible for those things when they become full time.

Respondents in this study even compared the importance of experience to that of a college degree. For many of the participants, work experience within the profession was even more important than having a degree in recreation. "A degree without working knowledge of a department doesn't cut it. If they went to school but have not worked part time for a recreation department, they've blown it." Participants in this study also perceive that the knowledge students receive in the classroom is limited. "They need to also have some experience in the field. The classroom doesn't really teach you everything you need to know to be successful in the field." Other participants went as far to say, "I would rather hire someone with part-time practical experience and no degree versus someone with a degree and no experience." Overall, the strongest theme reported by respondents was that recent college graduates with degrees in recreation can be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment by gaining direct municipal parks and recreation experience.

### **Interview Skills**

Interview skills was another strong theme within the data, which according to the participants in this study, were central to an applicant's success in securing employment in parks and recreation. This theme encompasses the ability of applicants to market themselves through written and verbal communication as well as articulating how job competencies and past experience relate to the position. Emphasizing the importance of communication skills, a respondent wrote, "Through the interview process, applicants must clearly articulate their job skills, past work experience, and to explain how they are an asset to the organization. "Develop writing and communication skills" and another reported, "A strong ability to communicate effectively, be organized. Understand the area of recreation you will be supervising, listen, and follow directions, don't be afraid to ask questions..." Communication specifically included being able to effectively communicate job competencies and past experience and how these relate to current positions, and possessing effective written communication skills like the ability to write staff reports.

An applicant's interview skills might even be more important than a well-crafted resume. A respondent wrote:

Candidates are not prepared for the actual interview process. They may have great skills at work, but turn out to be low ranked due to poor interview skills. They have to be able to sell themselves in the interview or it doesn't matter their experience or resume.

The information that managers and those who are responsible for making entry-level hiring decisions see on an applicant's resume and cover letter must come to life through the interview process. One respondent wrote:

It's tough when you see on paper some good experience, but their interview skills and process, doesn't show this or they don't present themselves very well to the panel. Many of times I have hired people with less experience because in the



interview they seemed to answer the questions better, more energy and desire and just basically “sold” themselves better.

Through the interview process, job candidates must also successfully articulate their skill set and how these skills will benefit the agency. This represents a specific type of interview skills related to a candidate’s self-presentation. For example, another respondent in this study wrote:

Applicants need to emphasize what they can do/bring to the Department versus emphasizing what the Department will do for them. I am not interested in how much the position will ‘help’ out the applicant, I want to know why I should hire the applicant and how the applicant is going to ‘help’ the Department.

Overall, this theme strongly evidenced recent college graduate’s need to bolster interview skills, including their ability to communicate effectively (oral and written) and specifically to demonstrate how their education and experience relates to the job for which they are applying. One respondent summed it up as “Interview and communication skills practice. It seems that the candidate may be well educated, but can’t communicate their education, skills, experience, etc. The art of selling yourself is important, too.”

### **Job Awareness**

General job awareness was another dominant theme that emerged through the data analysis process. This theme includes the expectation that recent graduates will have some general knowledge about the agency, the community the agency serves, and an understanding of the specific position for which they are applying. Parks and recreation employers expect that job candidates will demonstrate this knowledge through the application and interview process. Emphasizing the importance of recent graduates being informed about the agency itself, one respondent wrote that applicants need to “Do their homework on the agency, most candidates don’t do this. If they do, they only search the internet.” This statement points to the importance that recent graduates must demonstrate knowledge of the agency beyond what can be found in the job description and an internet search. Respondents encourage those who are applying for a job in parks and recreation to take the time to visit the facility, and speak to facility employees and users. Awareness of the agency includes knowing the agency mission, organizational structure, program offerings, and population served. A respondent wrote, “Do your homework on the agency for which you are applying. Go to their webpage, learn about the specific position you are applying for. Take a visit out to the program/site and talk to folks.”

In addition to understanding the organization, students should also be aware of the community in which the agency serves. Awareness of the community includes understanding the demographics of the community, the types of recreation services available and desired within the community, funding sources, and identifying potential community partners. Speaking to the importance of community awareness, a respondent wrote, “Learn about the community for which they are applying. Research the programs, events and current recreation opportunities offered. Each community and organization is unique.” Echoing the importance of applicants having strong community awareness, a respondent wrote:

Don’t forget to do research on each community you are applying for and interviewing with. We want to know that you have actually looked at our websites, recreation guides and know something about the demographics we serve. Also

pay close attention to your cover letters and resumes. Make sure you tailor it to each job you are applying for.

Community awareness includes being able to tailor the programs to meet the specific needs of the people in the service area. A respondent wrote, "Be sure they have an understanding of the "big picture" and think in terms of the community when delivering services rather than just that program and it's specific population."

Awareness also included the idea that applicants should have a clear understanding of the position in which they are applying as well as what will be expected of them if they successfully get the job. When interviewing, recent graduates must demonstrate their understanding of the job and have appropriate expectations in regards to the work-related tasks, hours, and salary. When writing about general position awareness, a respondent wrote, "Know about the job they are applying for and what the position does. Be prepared to ask questions about the agency and the job." Other respondents emphasized the importance that students have realistic expectations regarding the position and its salary. A respondent wrote, "understand that you may be starting at the bottom level and that they need to work themselves up the ladder." Highlighting the notion that people have to be willing to work their way up, another respondent wrote:

I find that expectations of graduates in any field are high regarding pay, ease of finding a job, etc... Realities are vastly different. It is not enough to just be a graduate with a degree a strong work ethic, passion for the field as well as willingness to 'pay one's dues' must be present. I have literally had graduates expecting \$40/hour right outside of graduation as well as unwillingness to commit to a traditional work schedule such as 9/80 workweek, 40 hours/week, nights weekends etc. ...

Together, these comments indicate an overall need for recent college graduates to prepare for entry-level employment by researching the agency and positions for which they are applying. Specifically, respondents recommended developing expectations that are appropriate for the position, and demonstrating knowledge of both the job and agency. Graduates seeking full time employment in municipal recreation should take advantage of the interview process and optimize their interview skills to demonstrate a strong working knowledge of the job and agency.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the perceptions of practitioners responsible for making hiring decisions, how recent college graduates can be better prepared for entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation. Three main themes emerged through the data analysis process, including experience, job awareness, and interview skills. These themes are further explored and discussed below.

The finding that professionals working in municipal recreation consider experience related to parks and recreation important is not surprising. To address this, most university programs with degrees in parks and recreation currently require students, at a minimum, to participate in some form of field experience, either through an internship or service-learning component in the curriculum. Many universities require a specific number of hours, in some cases up to 1,000 paid or volunteer recreation-related fieldwork hours, as well as minimum number of hours for an internship (usually 400 or more hours). Many

graduates with degrees in recreation then, graduate with around 1,400 hours of recreation-related experience, which can be viewed as roughly a year and a half of part-time (20 hours per week) work experience. While some students arguably accrue much more experience, it can be unclear as to what type of experience students are gaining in relationship to what employers are expecting. Although students must meet their respective fieldwork and internship requirements (minimum number of hours, completion of internship goals, etc.) for graduation, they may not gain the specific experience employers seek. The present study reveals that municipal recreation managers in California perceive recent college graduates as needing more direct municipal recreation experience. Therefore, educators should consider advising students who seek parks and recreation employment to focus their fieldwork and internship hours into the specific types of experiences described above.

Surprisingly, participants in this study showed a clear preference for hiring individuals who have a diverse and applied work experience portfolio over individuals with a degree in parks and recreation alone. Some respondents went as far as to state that they would hire a job applicant who had experience and no degree over a candidate who has a degree but no experience. This raises several questions important for educators in the recreation field: 1) How can students gain more experience related to municipal recreation; 2) If recent graduates possess that experience, how can they effectively convey that to employees who make hiring decisions; and 3) How do educators maximize service learning opportunities so that students are gaining the skills and experience employers desire?

For the participants in this study, recent graduates must be better prepared to articulate, through the interview process, their knowledge about the agency, community, and job. Graduates who can speak intelligently about a specific position and agency demonstrate a strong level of competence and readiness for entry-level, full-time employment. This knowledge may also have a direct relationship with work expectations.

This study also revealed a gap between what recent graduates expect to receive (e.g., position title, salary, and benefits) in their first entry-level position and what employers are ready to provide. Past research shows that many recent graduates in the broader leisure, recreation and tourism field have inflated expectations (Farmer & Tucker, 1988) and expect that they will receive middle management positions with optimal working conditions and benefits immediately upon graduation (Clark & Schukar, 2003). The results of this study indicate that many parks and recreation employers are not prepared to offer recent graduates these types of positions. Graduates need to be flexible and willing to work their way up the parks and recreation employment ladder. This finding is consistent with past research that emphasizes the importance that graduates be flexible and open to a variety of entry-level positions (Clark & Schukar, 2003; Chen & Gursoy, 2007). Universities that offer specialized degree programs and require internships may better prepare graduates for these realities and may also help students develop appropriate job expectations (Charels, 1992).

The results of this study also point to the importance of interview skills. The parks and recreation professionals in this study use the interview process to evaluate communication and interpersonal skills, as well as the graduates ability to effectively market their job skills and articulate how their experience relates to the current job opening. These results indicate a discrepancy between student preparation and effective communication of their preparation to potential employers during the interview process.

## Implications for “Closing the Great Divide” and Future Research

The results of this study provide several insights into what university programs can do to better prepare graduates for successful entry-level, full-time employment in municipal recreation. If a deficiency does exist in our graduates' ability to convey to employers the value of their experience and academic preparation, then we as educators must assist in making these linkages more apparent. Educators should consider new techniques (e.g., reflection exercises, mock interview exercises, etc.) to help students successfully communicate how their academic preparation and experience translates into the specific competencies employers are seeking.

Respondents in the current study clearly stated that recent graduates need more experience, indicating a perceived gap between the type of experience municipal recreation employers' desire, and what students acquire prior to graduation. Though many recreation programs require fieldwork and internship hours, students may complete the required hours outside of municipal recreation settings. As identified in the literature review, many recreation programs have begun to develop specializations and have shifted away from a general recreation degree. These specializations often require fieldwork and internships in related areas of practice: outdoor recreation, campus recreation, sports management, travel and tourism, and event planning. Students may complete their specializations, and then apply for municipal recreation positions. Educators might need to reevaluate fieldwork and internship experiences for students intending to pursue employment in municipal parks and recreation to ensure those experiences match employers' desires. While there is some research on competencies and how these relate to hiring practices of employers in municipal recreation (e.g., Chase & Masberg, 2008; Fulthorp & D'Eloia, 2015; Hurd, 2005), more research is needed to understand hiring practices in municipal recreation.

The key challenge facing university degree programs in parks and recreation is to provide the requisite academic preparation and experience for employment in a broad field, while at the same time, adequately prepare students to work in specialized areas. So far, degree programs have shifted away from a generalist approach and towards increasing specialization. Because research on the efficacy of academic programs to prepare graduates for employment in parks and recreation is in its infancy, it is not possible to compare how prepared graduates may have been when fewer specializations existed. Nevertheless, university degree programs need to consider ways to assist students in identifying their goal of working in municipal settings earlier, so they can focus their fieldwork, course selection, and internships in gaining varied municipal recreation experiences. Though some scholars have lamented specializations (e.g., Dustin & Schwab, 2008), generalist degree may not be any more likely to provide what employers seek. A specialization with a specific focus that prepares students for employment in municipal recreation may be needed. Given that municipal employees are often required to perform a wide range of job tasks, this type of specialization could better prepare students through meaningful and varied municipal recreation education and experiences.

Regardless of whether university programs take a generalist or specialist approach to designing curriculum, more research is needed to evaluate whether students graduate from these programs with the skills they need to secure full-time employment in municipal recreation. The accreditation standards set by COAPRT is a valued benchmark by which university parks and recreation programs establish credibility and ensure that students are receiving the necessary academic preparation our field requires. Research on job

competencies and the results of this study suggest that divide between what employers need and the training university offer may exist. To help bridge this divide, educators might want to consider reexamining the COAPRT accreditation standards to see how we might better align our curriculum with the competencies employers desire most. Creating curriculum standards that combine the specific skills training our graduates need to secure employment with the theoretical, historical, and philosophical knowledge educators value and believe are essential to advancing our profession will require a careful balancing act. However, if the “great divide” between the ivory tower and the profession are to be bridge, educators and practitioners will have to collaborate in future curriculum design efforts.

Ultimately, there is hope that the “great divide” is not all that great. Past research has already identified important job competencies (interpersonal, communication, community relations, leadership & management, and professional practice skills) for entry-level municipal employees (Hurd, 2005). Recent research confirms that these competencies are important to managers who make entry-level hiring decisions (Fulthorp & D'Eloia, 2015). When asked how recent graduates can be better prepared for entry-level employment, with the exception of communication skills, respondents did not identify any of these competency categories as areas of needed improvement for recent graduates. This suggests that current academic programs may provide sufficient training and education to equip entry-level, full-time municipal recreation workers for success. More research is needed to examine what would constitute the next evolution in a degree program for municipal recreation. However, based on the findings from the present study, future graduates need stronger interpersonal and communication skill development, in addition to targeted experience within a municipal recreation setting.

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