



The

Contemporary Management Issues Think Tank
for Parks and Recreation



Featured Viewpoints

Submitted for consideration by professionals unable to attend but interested in the Think Tank topics.

Parks and Recreation as Part of the Community Health Care System

(Item 3—Top 3 Industry Opportunities)

Karla A. Henderson, North Carolina State University

Parks and recreation opportunities in communities offer a significant venue for promoting active living, which leads to better health. Public parks, in particular, are accessible to most people, generally offer free year round opportunities, and provide a enjoyable setting for promoting physical activity. The purpose of this viewpoint is to emphasize the opportunities that community recreation and park agencies have in positioning themselves and becoming a recognized contributor to the health care system. Although parks and recreation advocates have always seen their mission as promoting health in communities, many opportunities in the future exist to make the contributions visible through planning, programming, and advocacy.

Obesity and cardiovascular disease are growing international concerns. Researchers who study leisure behavior acknowledge the range of activities that provide enjoyment to people including physical activity in its various dimensions such as walking, exercise, and sports. Public recreation agencies are facilitators and managers of healthy recreational opportunities in their communities that emphasize the physical and mental health of citizens as well as overall environmental health.

The primary foundational construct that guides thinking about the contributions of public park and entities to physical is social ecological theory. Although individuals make decisions about how to use their time and where to recreate, multiple facets of the physical and social environments influence the well-being of people. Environments such as park and recreation settings and amenities can enhance a range of behaviors by facilitating certain actions while discouraging or prohibiting other behaviors. Thus, the availability of opportunities as well as social marketing to encourage people to be physically active is paramount. The opportunities to further promote physical activity in the future include active planning to consider the role parks and recreation play in public health, message articulation about the benefits of parks and recreation for both mental and physical health, and equitable access to recreation opportunities to reduce health disparities that exist across the U.S. (e.g., for some ethnic minority groups, low-income families, people with disabilities, older adults).

The US Department of Health and Human Services (2000) in *Healthy People 2010* noted that the creation and access to places and facilities where people can be physically active is a nationwide objective. In a U.S. survey undertaken by city managers in 2005, 89% indicated that the primary governmental agency responsible for helping to address the obesity problem is parks and recreation. Although many examples exist of communities that have successfully incorporated their role in contributing to physical activity by choice, little evidence-based evaluation has been conducted. Thus, a major challenge for the future is to not only to articulate the potential of parks and recreation as part of the community health care system, but to evaluate how parks and recreation directly contributes to greater physical activity in communities, and thus better health.

Reassessing the Teaching of Evaluation

(Item 5—Teaching in University Curricula)

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Recreation and park professionals want people to enjoy themselves and become “better” as a result of participating in recreation activities or in visiting parks. Happy faces can be observed and participants can be counted. However, documenting long term change in behavior as well as replicating the organizational and programmatic processes that underlie change are difficult. The purpose of this viewpoint is to reassess how evaluation “methods” can be taught in university curricula. The assumption remains that the processes of evaluation aim to measure the outcomes of efforts to determine the value of programs, areas, and facilities so that ongoing improvements can be made, but new approaches can be considered.

NRPA Accreditation standards for university curricula have always included a focus on evaluation (i.e., 8.14.07 Evaluation of programs/events; 8.25.04 Evaluation (principles and procedures of developing areas and facilities). Every accredited university undergraduate program teaches evaluation methods. I contend, however, that education about evaluation in the future requires more emphasis on understanding the outcome changes resulting from the efforts of parks and recreation agencies as well as the direct links between the “intervention” (i.e., the program, area, or facility) and the outcomes. Although determining participant recreation (e.g., whether the leadership was effective or the program was the right length) is important, evaluation education should be linked to higher level outcomes as well as intentional programming goals. Further, methods of evaluation must be taught as essential tools to use, but the upshot of evaluation should be how information is applied to make better decisions to improve agency effectiveness.

Evaluation of recreation and park programs can occur at a number of levels. Evaluating the inputs to programs and the number of people who participate is essential. Knowing the reactions in terms of satisfaction with recreation opportunities is also important. The more difficult aspects to evaluate include changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations and ultimately changes in leisure lifestyles, which cannot always be measured using opinion surveys.

Another focus of evaluation needs to better tie agency goals to short-term as well as long-term outcomes relative to individual behavior and community development. The logic model has emerged in recent years as a framework for examining how program components lead to participant outcomes. Although other ways exist to design evaluation in parks and recreation, this logic model moves evaluation approaches beyond an emphasis primarily on participant reactions.

Another emerging area in evaluation particularly in health fields is evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice refers to research or evaluation undertaken to inform (best) practices. Knowing that living close to a park or participating in a sports program enables an individual to be more active is not enough without knowing what is it about the park or about the particular program that resulted in behavior change? Linking positive outcomes to best practices is an essential challenge for evaluators in the future.

Although evaluation has always been important in the field of parks and recreation, teaching ways to answer the emerging questions of impact requires additional ways of thinking about evaluation in university curricula in the future.

7 Rules for the Coming Decade

Submitted "Featured Viewpoint" by Ellen O'Sullivan

Naturally, we all know that there are NO longer rules that can govern or guarantee much of anything, but there are certainly strategies and/or directions that make a great deal more sense for the challenges and changes ahead in the next decade – which is only 2 years away.

Not in any particular order, the rules, strategies, and directions to ponder (and act upon) between now and 2010 include the following:

#1: Reflect What's Important and Critical to Your Community.

Regardless of how your department or area of responsibility defines "your community", you need to make certain that what you do specifically and strongly reflects those needs and issues that are important to that community. In Los Angeles, the role of parks and recreation recently received attention and praise because of its role in reducing juvenile crime. Target the issues and challenges specific to your community.

#2. Move Away from Individual Services to Community Wide Benefits and Outcomes.

While individuals consistently can cite the role and importance that parks and recreation plays in their own lives, that doesn't justify the expenditure of public monies on individual satisfaction. We need to make sure that our role and services contribute to the general public good. Metro-Denver is building upon the fact that Colorado is the healthiest state in the United States and therefore, a good place to relocate a business. This is an excellent example of transforming individual attributes to community-wide impact.

#3. Shift from Economic Impact to Economic Asset

For years now we have been making the case that public parks and recreation has an economic impact upon communities. While that is true and can work well, it is more desirable to be an asset that is making a contribution every day of the week rather than merely for special events and tourism which has long been a focus of economic impact. A quote from the Mayor Michael Nutter of Philadelphia in the recent report, *How Much Value Does the City of Philadelphia Receive from its Park and Recreation System?*, "You will see that Philadelphia's parks are an essential part of the city's economic and cultural infrastructure" reflects this approach.

#4. It's NOT What We DO But What We Make HAPPEN!

In general, in parks and recreation, we spend more time and money telling people about "what we do" through brochures, ads, etc. and much less or little time sharing information about what "we make happen". Granted it is important to let people know what we are offering so they can partake of these programs and services, but the real value of parks and recreation is the results or outcomes attributed to these programs and services. The general public and certainly decision-makers support facilities and services for older adults, but the real value of such services lies with the outcomes associated with these services, i.e. ability to live independently longer, increased mental capacity, etc.

#5. Identify what makes our approach unique and important

How many other organizations and agencies provide similar programs and services as we do? How do we differentiate ourselves, our value, and our important outcomes from the others? One way is parks. What NRPA had to say about it "starting in parks" was right on target because for the most part we are THE source for open and natural space within

communities. In addition to our unrivaled asset of public parks, there is also the “fun” factor. While it does not entirely make us unique related to some other nonprofit services, it is important to note that “fun is fundamental” to so many important outcomes, i.e. physical health being at the top of the list.

#6. From Full Service to Facilitator.

At every conference presentation or agency consulting project, someone always raises the issue of how do we provide all of the things that people increasingly demand? While everyone present in the room, groans in agreement, my response is always the same. “You don’t!” Our role was never intended to be the answer to everyone’s leisure preferences, but rather as the facilitator of such preferences. Focus upon providing guidance, education and basic skill development as a way to help people understand their own needs and explore alternatives to become independent leisure participants. It can no longer be about outfitting a youth sports team as if they are ready for the major leagues and then subsequently losing so many of those participants by age 12. A better alternative is an 8 or 10 week long workshop where young people can learn the basics and try out a host of different physical activities.

#7. From Professionally Centered to Participant-Collaboration

Yes, we are professionals and it may well be that our struggle to convince others that we are professionals is what holds us back from our real potential. Sitting in offices and independently deciding upon what people need and want does not unleash the real power and promise of parks and recreation. It is when we seek out the genuine input and involvement of people throughout a community, that our true potential is achieved. *There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication....* quote from John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer.

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1. What is the most significant driver affecting how and why we provide parks, recreation and leisure services now, and how has it changed since you entered the field?

I entered the parks and recreation field in the summer of 1965 as a playground crafts specialist and later as a playground leader. Those three summers in Modesto, CA introduced me to the whole idea of providing free programming for community members. After graduation from college I took my first position as a community center director, I was the only staff person at the small center, in Ventura, CA. Essentially all of our programs were free. We were located in a neighborhood suggesting members could not afford to pay. Our job was to provide opportunities for participation. Later as a youth sport supervisor I discovered the need for accounting systems and minimal fees for participants. Everyone, however, was allowed to participate and the cost of participation was frequently born by team and program sponsors. As I moved on to pursue graduate degrees I watched the passage of California's Proposition 13 realizing that government would never be the same. I spent 11 years moving from a Master of Arts degree to a doctorate, to my first faculty position and achieving tenure. Then came the opportunity to lead a moderate size public recreation department. The lessons of my first position, my academic preparation, the observation of the field were beneficial. We had moved from a near fully tax-funded organization to one dependent upon entrepreneurship, creativity, strategic partnering (although it had different names), and other tools designed to increase revenue. We were still mandated to provide a certain level of services free to the public, but targets for revenue generation were common, and frequently challenging. The traditional education of the 1960s and 70s gave way to more emphasis on marketing, finance, and fees and charges. The recreation profession, when viewed as a composite of organizations, is as diverse today as any multinational corporation, and in the interim we have begun to lose our foundations. Consider the following: My first position was in a small park and recreation center with one full-time staff person and a core of part-time staff. There was minimal accountability. The budget was flexible and wholly came the general fund. Today's supersized recreation centers that are appearing have more the feel of a Wal-Mart than of a community recreation center. At least one department with a super-center determined they didn't need recreation programmers. Use of the recreation center by groups who did their own planning, fitness programs provided by trainers, and day-care provided for those using the center and adjacent water park was deemed sufficient. Why program when enough funding can be derived without a programmer. This is not the profession I entered. Today I live in a large western metropolitan area dotted with neighborhood recreation centers where programmers are striving to provide services, where budgets still drive the ability of departments and centers to provide services, where revenue generation, grant writing, and fundraising is paramount, and unfortunately assessment is still not clearly understood. While we have entered a new era of public parks and recreation I find as I view public agencies that there is a great diversity of how departments operate, determine accountability, deal with politics, and are funded. There remains much to learn.

2. What are the top 3 industry challenges for the next 10 years?

Arguably identifying 3 industry challenges over a 10-year period suggests a level of stability and normality that has not existed for the last 30 plus years. However, there are some broader issues I feel need and must be addressed by all agencies during that period. They are: sustainability, legitimacy, and connectivity to the customer. We live in a period when the operative commitment of many politicians is to reduce taxes, reduce government involvement in citizen's lives, and strengthen private enterprise simultaneously with citizens expecting and demanding greater services from government. Regardless who is president, whether we redistribute wealth or reduce taxes for the wealthy, government involvement will grow. The legitimacy of the parks and recreation profession is relatively questioned. The ability and willingness of government to pay for it, however, is questionable. Few public agencies today can say they have sufficient funds to operate. At the same time direct competition is growing – whether it be from commercial enterprises, nonprofit organizations, or parent-based sport and other groups. Legitimacy is the ability “to be defended with logic or justification” (Apple Dictionary, 2002) the existence and viability of public parks and recreation. Some agencies are doing this well, but from a macro perspective, too many public agencies struggle with the ability to justify their current position and are not building constituencies that can give them the political and economic capacity to overcome the potential future.

Sustainability is, at a very narrow perspective, a financial, resource, people, and program issue. For public park and recreation agencies sustainability must include environmental concerns and we must be at the forefront. The greater issue, however, is the social and economic sustainability essential for long-term operations. After observing public agencies at the local and state level I've come to believe the most effective funding model occurs when they are stand-alone taxing districts. Having said that, the reality is the vast majority of departments are not and because they are not new models of sustainability must be created and adapted to fit the needs of the many types of agencies providing parks and recreation.

Connectivity to the customer is a critical challenge and part of social and fiscal sustainability. The parks and recreation profession must fully embrace the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), what marketers call “managing the total customer experience” (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2007). The concept of the experience economy will allow public agencies to look at the leisure experience from a new and creative perspective. It will change customer service, program delivery, front office operations, and the whole notion of dealing with the public. It is an essential and necessary change.

3. What are the top 3 industry opportunities for the next 10 years and why?

The top 3 industry opportunities for the next 10 years – let's say 5 since that is a more realistic and achievable window of opportunity – are (1) a continuing expansion of the concept of the leisure experience, especially from a commercial perspective and from fringe recreation groups (Every administrator should read “The Long Tail” by Chris Anderson), (2) integration of well-being (authentic happiness) into recreation programming (The work of Cynthia Carruthers and Colleen Hood are essential reading: *The Power of Positive Leisure and Well Being; Building a Life of Meaning Through Therapeutic Recreation: The Leisure and Well Being Model, Parts 1 and 2*), and (3) creating opportunities for authenticity by visitors to parks, participants in recreation programs, and drop-ins to community centers (“The Experience Economy” by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore; “Making Visitors Mindful: Principles for Creating Sustainable Visitor Experiences through Effective Communication” by Gianna Moscardo; and the forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*).

4. What types of tools or methodologies are needed now to address planning for our industry?

1. Measures that indicate the effectiveness in implementing processes and plans enhancing the importance of Ecosystem well-being as a social tool as an integrated challenge facing the world. The concept of ecosystem well-being is not necessarily new, but brings with it a global perspective of “how ecosystem changes may affect people in future decades, and what types of responses can be adopted at the local, national, or global scales to improve ecosystem management and thereby contribute to human well-being and poverty alleviation” (World Resources Institute, 2003, Washington: Island Press, p. x). The focus of this report is upon well-being of the human family ensuring it continues to, or can in the future, move from dimensions of ill-being to dimensions of well-being encompassing components of freedom of choice and action, security, good health, good social relations, and materially enough for a good life. These may vary from community to community, but it is clear that in the United States public park and recreation systems are struggling to maintain what they have, much less be able to contribute to the broader scope of building within individuals and organizations the ability to achieve a higher level of well-being, not to be interpreted as wealth creation. The role of public parks and recreation, as it has always been, is to contribute to the social well-being of individuals by applying the components of well-being to their operations and planning.

2. Sustainability planning from a local and global view. Public parks and recreation should be implementing world-class sustainability operations. Every park and recreation system should be moving towards sustainability models that exhibit best practices, that partner with local and regional sustainability efforts, that provide local park and recreation users with broad based examples of programs encouraging sustainability. Where I live, in a water challenged region, public park and recreation agencies are creatively reducing the amount of water usage by a variety of strategies, including eliminating green space, strategically locating green space where it will be most used, implementing cutting-edge watering techniques, etc. My campus has reduced its use of water by over 13 million gallons annually through an aggressive landscape management program of eliminating grass and replacing it with native species and creating park like settings.

3. Succession planning is commonly thought of as a human resources planning tool, but it also needs to be system planning, looking beyond the scope of human resources and conducting planning for all levels of system operations. Granted, this is occurring in almost every system, but except for a few notable exceptions the planning tends to be local or regional. I am not calling for a return to SCORPs (State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans) since they were primarily funding acquisition tools all too often not related to actual local planning needs. Rather, sustainability planning calls for integration of planning across political boundaries focusing on the good of the region, state, nation, and world as the primary impetus. While it may sound idealistic, in our new global society, any planning that does not look beyond the local and regional can be equated to sticking one’s head in the sand.

6. What are the most impactful innovations and/or methodologies that need to be emphasized in ongoing professional development (conferences & schools) curricula?

My experience with professional development schools has been positive. I ran an executive development program for 11 years and we taught what we, as a board of directors, thought were the greatest need for mid-level managers looking toward executive level positions. The variety of NRPA schools is impressive. Beyond that there are many other discipline/topic specific training programs across the country. Yet, as I have participated in and watched these schools for 30 plus years, each school appears to remove itself

further from parks and recreation philosophies and theories. As we embrace knowledge and attempt to apply it back to our agencies I find not a loss of the leisure ethic, but rather stagnation. We are caught in our way of looking at the leisure profession that we typically learned in college. *Parks and Recreation* magazine's "Research into Action" section is the most read piece in the magazine, and yet it too infrequently addresses leisure theory with application to operations. There is a belief that practitioners do not like theory, and yet leisure theory is changing and evolving. As practitioners we cannot afford to be left behind emerging theory, changes in knowledge, and changes in delivery. There should be an anxious desire of those in our profession to better understand "experience" within and beyond the leisure experience. Most importantly we must come to realize the leisure experience begins with the first piece of information an individual receives, not when the program starts. All aspects of the organization impact the experience and public parks and recreation must begin making overt efforts to manage the experience more effectively.

8. *What is not working in our industry that needs to be repaired?*

Working

1. Relevancy
2. Program delivery
3. Communication

Not Working

1. Commitment / Funding of parks
2. Perceived vs real safety
3. Sense of place / Attachment / Authenticity

9. *What can NRPA and/or State Associations do to help agencies the most?*

1. Enhanced cooperation between states with similar problems/challenges
2. Best practices models adapted for different settings
3. Enhanced on-line or distance training
Embracing social networking and other technological issues. Become a blogger.
4. Networking
5. Creating a sense of belonging that goes beyond the community
6. Build broad-based coalitions

Top 3 Industry Challenges

Submitted by Amy Hurd, Illinois State University

A driving force behind pressing agency challenges is the impending retirement of baby boomers (1946-1964). As of 2008 78 million are ready to retire. This does not account for death, illness, and major life changes. Sixty percent of all companies do not know what they are going to do about this. The challenge for parks and recreation is the need for succession planning, staff training and development, and keeping the right people in the right jobs.

Succession planning is defined as identifying and preparing suitable employees to assume key positions within the organization. Succession plans are long term, focus on future leadership, and are geared toward preparing staff to fill several different positions within the agency. Succession planning requires the agency to 1) understand staff development needs, 2) identify potential successors, and 3) develop and train successors.

Understand staff development needs: This requires the staff to have an understanding of the competency needs within the profession and the agency. Competencies are skills, knowledge, abilities and characteristics to be successful on the job. These competencies change as an employee moves from entry level to middle management to an administrative level. To fully understand the development needs in the organization it is imperative to have a success plan for each position by knowing what competencies are critical to the position. Once this is complete a competency gap assessment is needed to see where the agency currently is and where it needs to be. Keep in mind a solid succession plan will look at all levels of the organization rather than just the CEO level.

Identify potential successors: A good succession plan will identify several people for key positions. This gives the agency flexibility and eliminates appointing an heir apparent. When selecting potential successors, people at all levels should be identified. These people are the high performers, but not necessarily the one best person in each area.

Develop and train successors: Training and development requires an investment of resources in staff. It requires agencies to look at "growing their own." While some agencies see the value in looking outside to fill positions, with the current shortage in potential employees, investing in staff is important. Even if people leave after the agency has invested training dollars in them, they undoubtedly contributed to the organization while they were there, and they carry the reputation of the organization to the new job.

When many of those currently in middle and upper management were choosing careers, public service was seen as a noble cause. Things have changed and there is an inherent distrust in government. The result is fewer people choosing public parks and recreation. Some choose it, but many end up there by default when tourism, sport, or commercial recreation was where they envisioned themselves. Public parks and recreation agencies need to hire good people and develop ways to keep these people. Succession planning, training and development, and keeping people in the right jobs may be the solution to this issue.