

STATE OF EDUCATION COMMITTEE FINDINGS

The Status of Educational Needs for Parks, Recreation, and Related Professionals – 2021

By Teresa L. Penbrooke, PhD, CPRE; Chris Cares, MURP; and Eric Legg, PhD, CPRP



GP RED
Research Brief

#14

✉ info@gpred.org
www.gpred.org

In 2020 the GP RED State of Education committee convened to look at the challenges the field of parks, recreation, and related practices were having related to education and training for qualified professional applicants. The committee included 45 practitioners from public agencies, educators, and non-profit organizations. Two surveys were conducted, one of leaders of related university-level degree programs, and one of public parks and recreation practitioners and related professionals in the field. This Research Brief provides a summary of historical context, findings from the surveys, messaging insights, and observations related to potential next steps for these diverse educational and professionals fields.



State of Education Leaders and Collaborators

The future of parks and recreation is dependent upon our ability to train and develop future leaders in the field. Recently, some university parks and recreation programs have been eliminated (e.g. University of Georgia and Metro State University in Denver) and many others report declining enrollment. Simultaneously, some parks and recreation providers have reported difficulties in hiring qualified applicants. In response to these conditions, In 2020, GP RED convened a “State of Education (SOE) Committee” with the intent of bringing together both practitioners and educators to evaluate the state of parks and recreation education and work together to advance education and the development of future leaders. The SOE committee consists of approximately 45 practitioners and educators, including individuals from Arizona State University (ASU), the University of Utah, California Polytechnic Institute, North Carolina State University, George Mason University, the University of Colorado-Denver, GP RED, and RRC Associates. Eric Legg, PhD, CPRP, from ASU serves as chair of the committee.

The committee identified challenges in the professional Parks and Recreation (P&R) field around changing educational programs, lack of qualified applicants, and other issues that had been heard anecdotally. Several SOE committee members identified the need to gather data on what really is happening around the U.S. on this topic, and created two

surveys to move forward in a study. This report highlights the findings from this work.

Guiding Questions for the SOE Study

- What is Parks and Recreation's (P&R's) distinctive value as a degree?
- What is the role of university education in the success of P&R?
- What should it be?
- How can P&R degrees be more relevant?
- How can universities attract additional students to P&R degree programs?
- How should universities' P&R programs position themselves?
- Is the name "parks and recreation" even the right positioning?
- How are P&R integrated into other areas (e.g., community development, public health, sustainability)

Historical Context

Early parks and recreation degree programs emerged following the end of WWII as more attention was being given to youth fitness and increased leisure time activities. In 1974, the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT) was formed, holding its first congress in Denver, Colorado. The organization began accepting applications from universities and colleges for accreditation in 1976, with North Carolina State University's Department of Recreation Resources Administration receiving the first accreditation the following year.

Ebbs and flows in the economy, including major recessions have led to increased budget pressure for parks and recreation agencies. An increase in privatization of recreation and leisure services has lured some community members and their discretionary dollars away from municipal programs and services, giving the appearance of providing alternatives to public service, but will largely only serve those who can afford to "pay for play," leaving a significant portion of our population who need these services without them, if discontinued in the public realm. There has been a decline in accredited programs throughout the United States. There has also often been tension between the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), The Academy of Leisure Science, various state associations, and other groups related to standards for accreditation, publishing, certifications, messaging, and other aspects for the field. This has led to non-congruent marketing campaigns, inconsistent language, and requirements for professionals.



Current State of P&R Degree Programs

As pressures have mounted within the field, universities and colleges have begun dropping their recreation and leisure studies programs. At this time, there are approximately 75 COAPRT accredited degree programs, about 300 P&R allied degree programs, and approximately 500 existing sport management programs available at various higher education institutions across the country.

State of Education - Academic Leaders Survey

To determine the current climate related to educational resources in parks, recreation, leisure, sport management, recreational therapy, and related degree programs, the GP RED SOE team conducted a study involving academic leaders. A total of 64 leaders from various institutions were given a questionnaire that included the following questions:

- ▶ What are your parks and recreation degree names?
- ▶ How many students are enrolled in the program?
- ▶ Provide a profile of undergraduates in the program.
 - What emphasis/concentrations are offered through your program, and how many students are enrolled in each?
 - What programmatic or curriculum changes have you made in the past five years?
 - What enrollment trends have you seen within your program?

Of the 64 participants, 52% offer at least one degree program, 22% offer at least two degree programs, and 17% offer at least three degree programs. These programs cover a wide range of titles and areas of study, including:

- Community development
- Kinesiology
- Criminal justice – Conservation law enforcement
- Human kinetics and recreation
- Physical education
- Natural resources and environment
- Human performance
- Experience management

Over 20 names for graduate degree programs were listed. This may contribute to confusion as to professional identity. (Figure 1)

Agriculture	Education and Human Development
Adaptive Sports	Family and Consumer Sciences
Community Development	Sport and Recreation Management
GeoSpatial Sciences	Sustainable Leisure Management
Hospitality, Recreation & Tourism	Coaching
Natural Resources and Sustainability	Recreation Administration
Recreation and Leisure Studies	Therapeutic Recreation
Parks and Recreation Management	Nutrition and Exercise Science
Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management	Human Kinetics and Recreation
Recreation, Parks, Tourism & Nonprofit Management	

Figure 1: Names for Related Graduate Degree Programs

University Type

Of the responding institutions, the highest percentage by far (82.8%) were public universities. This was followed by Baccalaureate College (26.6%), Land Grant Institution and Doctoral University (25% each), Doctoral/ Professional University (21.9%), and medium-sized Master’s Colleges and Universities (20.3%). Private Universities, Regional/Comprehensive Universities, R2: Doctoral Universities, large Master’s Colleges and Universities; Baccalaureate/Associate’s Collage, and Associate College rounded out the respondents.

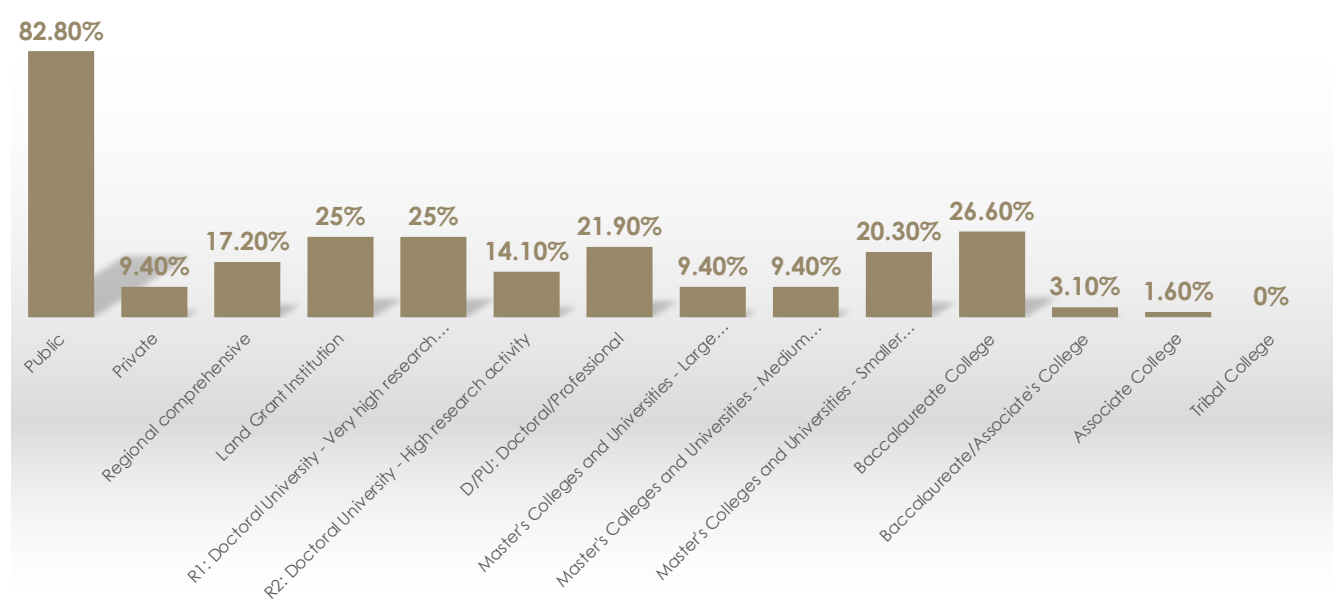


Figure2: University Types



Enrollment Trends

This study was conducted prior to the pandemic. While the anecdotal reports indicated that enrollments were dropping, this study indicated that there had been little change in enrollment over the prior three years. In 2017, an average of 173 students were enrolled in Parks and Recreation degree programs. In 2018, it was an average of 169, and in 2019, an average of 172 students were enrolled in each program. It will be of interest to evaluate how/if this changes in a post-pandemic world.

Program or Curriculum Changes

The SOE Committee members reported challenges in that many academic programs are being changed. The study indicated that since 2015, programs and/or curricula within these degree concentrations have changed significantly. Respondents noted that from 2015-2016, 17% of programs experienced changes. In 2019-2020, about 48% of the program indicated significant changes in the curriculum in the past five years. 36% reported that the changes were typically beyond the control of the academic leaders.

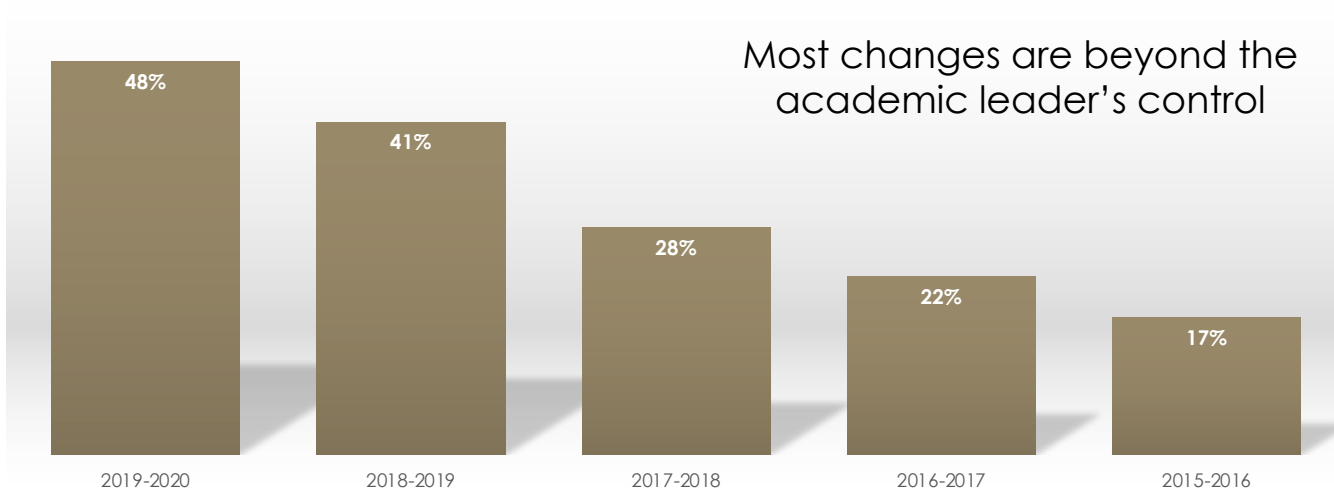


Figure 3: Program or Curriculum Changes in the Past Five Years



Types of Program and Curriculum Changes

Various types of changes were reported, including accreditation, combining programs/majors/degrees, curriculum changes, name changes, and faculty changes. Many respondents also indicated eliminations of majors within the program, various courses, and Master's Degree programs.

While some respondents reported reductions in their curriculum/programs, others indicated that they had added programs. These changes include new course options, new majors/minors, a new Master's Degree option, a dual major/minor option, certificate programs, online options, new emphasis areas, and a 4+1 year degree program. Some respondents indicated that they had submitted proposals for a stand-alone degree, and others indicated that they were in the process of strategic planning for their degree programs.

When asked to identify what was causing these changes, one person responded, "I don't mean to be flip, but if I knew what was really impacting enrollment, I would have addressed this already. I honestly don't know."

Many changes to programs and curriculum were due to factors beyond the control of Department leadership. These factors included budget cuts, curriculum changes, budget changes, leadership changes, and faculty loss, among others. Respondents also indicated a decrease in enrollment.

Other changes to curriculum and programming included a reorganization of colleges and schools within the university that offered parks and recreation management programs. Some respondents indicated program name changes and transfer of the program to a new department.

The GP REDLine Practitioners Survey

In order to further develop the State of Education Report with a voice from P&R practitioners and related professionals, RRC Associates distributed an online survey to over 8,000 individuals on the GP RED national email list, and also placed invitations to the survey on social media. The survey received between 220 and 230 completed responses on most questions.

A broad range of professionals were represented within respondents. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they worked for a city (58%). Other respondents worked for special districts, counties, not-for-profit companies, universities, private organizations, State level recreation, Federal level recreation, and other.

Most respondents were either the director or executive director of their organization (28%). Other job titles included supervisor, coordinator, middle management, assistant director, analyst, professor or associate professor, superintendent, president/CEO, and other.

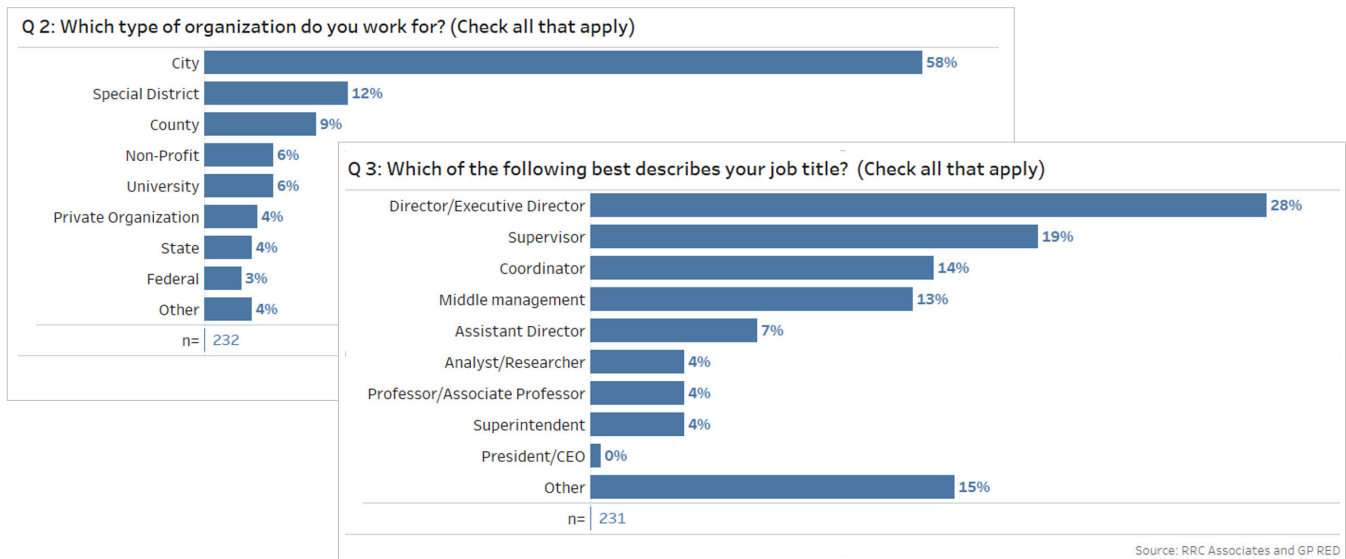


Figure 4: Profile of Survey Respondents

“We want to hire more diverse staff, but a lot of our younger staff who are people of color and may be great at the job just don’t have the time or money to go get a 4-year degree”.

A Snapshot of the Issue of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As 2020 was a year of realizing there is a continuing need for significant attention for improved diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts in all fields (certainly including P&R), this practitioners survey asked how respondents feel about this topic in their agencies. Eighty-three percent (83%) of respondents who answered this question indicated that their agency has a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and most respondents felt that their agency provides equal employment opportunities, but there is still room for improvement.

Respondents were asked about topics related to diversity issues within their workplace. In response to the statement, “In my organization, I feel like I belong because I am...” a variety of responses were given. “Feeling comfortable with being myself at work” and “feeling that my contributions in team meetings are valued” both had a 69% response. Other responses included “recognized for my accomplishments,” “transparent communication about company developments,” and “all of the above,” as indicated in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Perceptions of Belonging Related to DEI Concepts

When asked to indicate their areas of responsibility, 72% stated that they were responsible for recreation and programming. Fifty-seven percent (57%) are responsible for youth, 55% for events, 52% for sports, 51% for camps, and 47% for parks. Responses that garnered less than a 50% response included seniors, volunteers, facilities management, maintenance, aquatics, marketing, park design, active transportation/trails, open space/conservation, land/property management, therapeutic/inclusion, horticulture, foundations, special programs, tourism, economic development, public health, enterprise, park police, motorized transportation, and other.

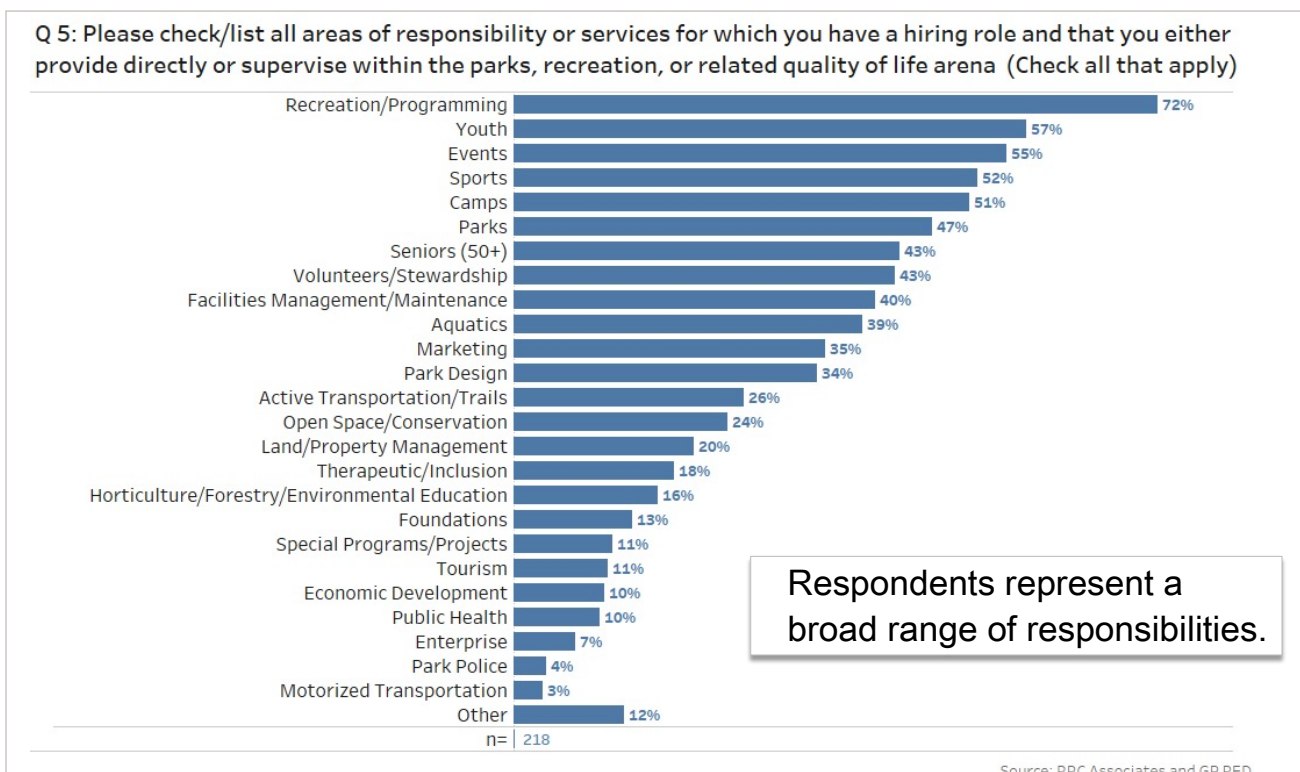


Figure 6: Areas of Responsibility

Organizational Elements

When asked if their organization had completed a system-wide master plan, comprehensive plan, strategic plan, or related plan for their department or other parks, recreation, and open space services, 55% answered yes, and 45% answered no. Fourteen percent (14%) indicated that they are currently accredited by CAPRA, and nine percent are seeking accreditation. Six percent had won a Gold Medal from the NRPA. Most respondents stated that their organization employed fewer than 50 (54%), while 23% indicated that their organization had 100-499 employees. Only two percent of respondents worked for organizations that employ more than 5,000.

When asked about their capital improvement budgets and their operating budgets, 24% of respondents indicated that their CIP budget was less than \$100, and 24% had a CIP of over \$5,000,000. Twenty-two percent (22%) had CIP budgets of \$50,000 - \$999,999, and 25% had CIP budgets in the range of \$1,000,000 - \$5,000,000. Most respondents (44%) reported operating budgets of over \$5,000,000.

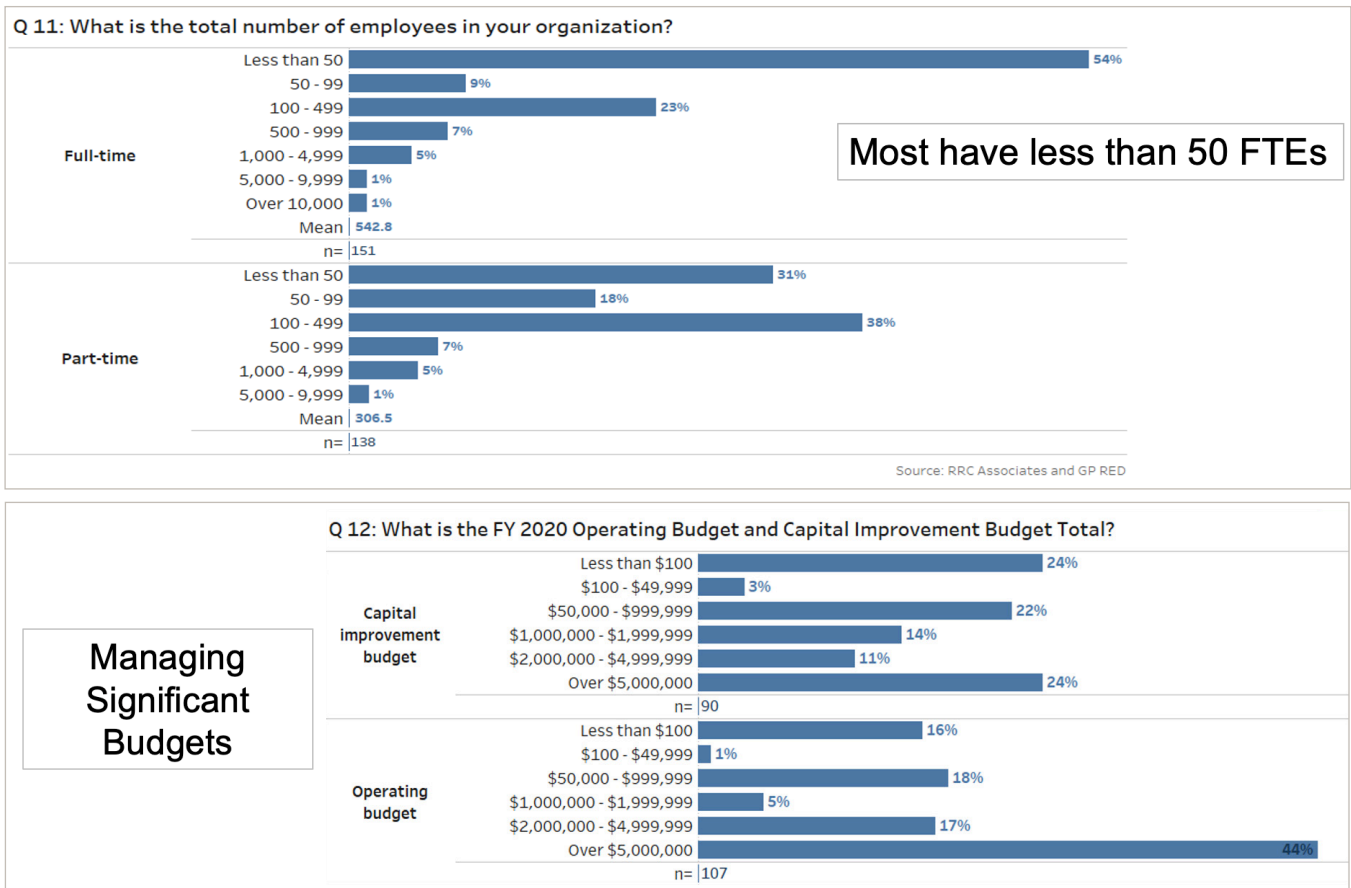


Figure 7: Number of Employees and Budgets



Associations and Memberships

Most respondents are members of the National Recreation and Park Association (77%) and their own state-level park and recreation association (71%). Other professional organizations to which respondents belong include the American Society for Landscape Architects, the City Parks Alliance, the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification, the Society for Outdoor Recreation Professionals, the Trust for Public Lands, and others. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of respondents indicated that they strongly encourage participation in these associations, while 28% moderately encourage participation. Only four percent stated that they do not encourage participation.

Of the public agencies who responded to the survey, 47% stated that they have an active college internship program, while 53% do not. Over half of the responding agencies (51%) indicated collaboration with colleges and university programs in provision of parks, recreation, and related programming.

Staffing Requirements

While background requirements for staff members vary by agency, there was consistency with responses. For employees at all levels, references are widely needed. Experience was important for mid-level and upper-management staff members, but not necessarily for entry level employees. Sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents require at least a 4-year recreation and parks management or related degree for upper management employees, and 56% require a parks and recreation related Master's Degree for these positions.



Figure 8: Requirements for Employment

“We have had huge numbers of retirements in the last decade, along with budget cuts so positions don’t get back filled. There is also a gap in hiring so we lose a lot of transition of knowledge.”

One of the most challenging parts of hiring new employees was **a lack of qualified applicants**. This was noted as a problem by 76% of respondents. Forty-six percent (46%) noted that applicants don’t have the appropriate skill set for the job, and 46% indicated a lack of people applying for open positions. Other challenges to hiring included hiring freezes, difficulties in the hiring process itself, and budget cuts.

Educational Attainment of Respondents

Most of the professionals responding to the survey stated that they had higher education. Over half (51%) have a Bachelor’s Degree, 35% have a Master’s Degree, and five percent indicated that they have a PhD. Of these respondents, over half (54%) have a degree that is in a field other than parks and recreation, while 46% have a related degree.

Beyond higher education, most respondents (between 41% and 54%) encourage their employees to pursue additional credentials. Many agencies encourage their employees to pursue continuing education credits and other trainings, while 41% encourage them to have a professional certification. To inspire employees to further their education, 49% of respondents offer a tuition assistance program. Of these agencies, 40% use a total allocation per semester, 34% offer a per-credit reimbursement, and 29% offer a total overall allocation for each employee.

Ninety-six percent (96%) provide funding for employees to attend conferences and trainings, which include local conferences, state conferences, and national conferences. Seventy-six percent (76%) of respondents stated that in-person conferences are currently the most effective ways to encourage professional education, followed closely by online webinars and trainings (70%). Only 20% stated that they were encouraging employees to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

Next Steps for the State of Education Committee

The GP RED SOE Committee continues to meet every 6-8 weeks in order to discuss relevant and ongoing issues and continue collecting and analyzing data as relevant. Specifically, the group is currently gathering best practices in student recruitment, development marketing collateral for parks and recreation education, and examining how to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within parks and recreation. The committee will also act in an advisory role for GP RED’s educational offerings. If you are interested in any additional information, please contact Eric Legg, PhD; eric.legg@asu.edu.

“I am a retired executive with 40 years experience in the field. I worked my way from an entry level position to Executive Director by working in the field and going to school nights. The most effective choice for me was to secure a degree as that changed my career path toward management role. It was invaluable for me to have the field experience along with the degree so I advanced quickly once I had the required degree. “

The PREPP

Based on the findings in the surveys and good work of the State of Education Committee, GP RED is now collaborating with the University of Colorado (CU – Denver) School of Public Affairs to create a new accelerated online program called the Parks and Recreation Emerging Professional Program (PREPP). This program is designed to serve a national audience, and may be offered in alliance with other universities around the country in future years. Participants will be grouped into cohorts starting in Fall 2021.

The PREPP will be a unique program for people who want to move ahead into mid and upper levels of supervision and administration, who need an education in management and planning, and are interested in a flexible, yet rigorous, program developed for working professionals in P&R. This includes those that may not have the resources or interest in completing a 4-year Baccalaureate degree program, but would like to make P&R their career choice.

Program curriculum will include a carefully selected set of topics including budgeting, human resources, facilities, planning, community engagement, organizational development, working with boards and committees, communications, and more. The curriculum is based on competencies and standards set out by the accrediting bodies for undergraduate programs in parks and recreation and public management, as well as national certificate programs in both fields. Individuals across the United States are eligible.

The PREPP is designed to be ideal for:

- Current parks and recreation (P&R) staff who have at least 3 years of full-time experience working for a public P&R agency, and a high school diploma, or a bachelor’s degree, or higher.
- People with a bachelor’s degree or higher from another field who want background and training in P&R planning and management to start working or further progress in the field of P&R.
- People who enjoy offering programs or facilities for the public but want more of a business and government management perspective with an introduction to executive-level competencies needed to move up or be the best they can be in their field.

The accelerated online program includes live class time (on Zoom) as well as an online course system for ongoing learning and study. Participants will complete 12 courses over a 15-month period – for a total of 180

“I would also say that curriculum needs to focus on the more practical aspects of mid-level and upper-level management. Degrees and certifications are necessary, if not essential, however daily job responsibilities require significant expertise in budget prep and monitoring, public relations, human resources and staff relations, conflict resolution, and political environments. I believe there should be a much greater focus on education in these areas since 80%+ of management time is spent on those issues. An aquatics certification is good to have, but if you can’t generate revenue and manage a budget, or you can’t hire and train staff, you will have difficulty becoming successful.”

hours of class time. Each set of three courses ends in a student portfolio, and the final series is capped with a self-directed capstone project that incorporates the learning across the entire program. Continuing Education Units will be available, and the program is designed to be in summary alignment with learning outcomes identified by the Council on Accreditation for Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, and the competency areas covered for certification for Certified Parks and Recreation Professionals and Executives (CPRP and CPRE). For more information, contact Teresa L. Penbrooke, PhD, CPRE, teresap@gpred.org.

Going Forward

Not all of the guiding questions for this study have been answered. Likely solutions will require coordinated messaging and collaboration of national, state, and local organizations.

Together, GP RED hopes to work with other organizations and associations, professionals, and educators to create unified branding strategies, and to offer qualified faculty members and content for various parks and recreation offerings. GP RED and the SOE committee will continue to convene, connect, and collaborate to help fill the gaps around this topic, and address how we can support preparing future parks and recreation professionals for work in our field.