

# AN EXAMINATION OF VARIABLES DISTINGUISHING ACCREDITED FROM NONACCREDITED RECREATION, PARK RESOURCES AND LEISURE SERVICES PROGRAMS

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## Abstract

Accreditation by the NRPA/AALR Council on Accreditation assures that recreation, park resources and leisure services programs meet the minimum standards for training professional leisure services providers in the U. S. The purpose of this research is to identify variables that distinguish NRPA/AALR accredited from nonaccredited recreation, park resources and leisure services programs to shed additional light on accreditation. The study identified size of full-time faculty and the number of full-time students as the two variables that distinguish accredited from nonaccredited recreation, park resources and leisure services programs. Suggestions are provided that may assist smaller programs to attain accredited status.

## Introduction

Reactions about the effects of accreditation in higher education are mixed. On one hand, accreditation has been criticized for being meaningless and lacking vigor or being too rigorous and promoting conformity at the expense of innovation (Levine, 1978) and, on the other hand, praised as a means for improving the quality of higher education, the quality of specific academic programs, or both (Berdahl, 1989). Regardless of whether an individual is a proponent or opponent of accreditation, generalizing the accreditation process is difficult because there is not a simple link between what different accrediting bodies require (Ewell, 1993).

The accreditation of baccalaureate recreation, park resources, and leisure services programs was formalized in 1977 when the National Recreation and Park Association/American Association of Leisure and Recreation (NRPA/AALR) sponsored Council on Accreditation (COA) granted the first accredited program status to North Carolina State University (Neipoth, 1998). Since 1977 the number of accredited baccalaureate recreation, park resources, and leisure services programs has steadily increased. Currently,

the NRPA/AALR COA accredits over 100 programs in the United States and Canada (NRPA, 2002).

According to the COA accreditation serves the public by promoting and maintaining professional preparation standards while simultaneously serving a baccalaureate program with (a) assistance in the development of appropriate goals for ensuring quality professional preparation, (b) ensuring continual program self-study for development and improvement, and (c) encouraging innovation and experimentation (NRPA, 2000).

The process for receiving accreditation for a recreation, park resources, and leisure services program is described in the *NRPA Handbook for the Accreditation Process: A Comprehensive Guide to Implementing Procedural Guidelines*. The process for baccalaureate program accreditation consists of five stages: (1) a program wishing to apply for accreditation must make application of its interest to the NRPA/AALR COA; (2) the program must conduct a self-study based on the standards and evaluative criteria developed by the COA; (3) the program, in conjunction with the COA, selects a visitation team of two educators and one practitioner from a list of qualified candidates who subsequently review the program's self-study report and conduct an on-site visitation; (4) the COA reviews the self-study report and conducts a hearing attended by the applying program, on-site visitation team members, and all active COA members. Based on the review of the self-study and all other accreditation information the COA then grants accreditation with or without conditions, or defers or denies accreditation; and (5) programs granted accreditation accept the status and provide annual reports and maintenance fees to the COA and undergo a formal review. If denied, a program may appeal the COA decision (NRPA, 1999).

For a program to become NRPA/AALR accredited it must meet eight separate categories of series standards and evaluative criteria related to the program's (1) unit characteristics; (2) philosophy and goals; (3) administration; (4) faculty resources; (5) student resources; (6) instructional resources; (7) foundational education curriculum requirements; and (8) recreation, park resources, and leisure services curriculum requirements. Programs may also make application to accredit program options in (a) leisure services management, (b) natural resources recreation management, (c) leisure recreation program delivery, and (d) therapeutic recreation (NRPA, 2000).

Review of the standards and evaluative criteria a baccalaureate recreation, park resources, and leisure services program must meet in order to become NRPA/AALR accredited without question highlights the comprehensiveness of the field's accreditation process in regard to both curricular and non-curricular issues. According to the NRPA (2002) there are over 350 recreation, park resources, and leisure services

programs in the United States, yet only one-third of those programs are currently accredited. A study by Longsdorf (2001) of issues related to accreditation, indicated that multiple respondents are interested in applying for accreditation but currently were unable because their programs cannot meet the evaluative criteria related to faculty requirements. Indications from the demographical information analyzed in the study indicated that program size might be an impeding factor in the ability of many programs to become NRPA/AALR accredited.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine variables that distinguish NRPA/AALR accredited recreation, park resources, and leisure services programs from recreation, park resources, and leisure services programs without NRPA/AALR accreditation to provide the field with a better understanding of factors that might impede a program's ability to become accredited. At present research assessing the effectiveness of NRPA/AALR accreditation is lacking (Caneday, 2000). With less than thirty percent (100) of the over 350 recreation, park resources and leisure services programs identified by the NRPA as being accredited, research examining the differences between accredited and non-accredited programs needs to become an area of focus within the field's scholarly endeavors. Such research is needed to address issues concerning accreditation and the design of recreation, park resources and leisure services program's ability to train professionals to meet the changing demands of the profession.

### **Study Population**

This study is a secondary analysis of data used in Longsdorf's (2001) study of faculty perceptions of academic preparation of recreation, park resources, and leisure services students. The population of colleges and universities in the Longsdorf study consisted of 182 colleges and universities offering degrees in recreation, park resources, and/or leisure services throughout the U. S. The population consisted of 100 colleges and universities with NRPA/AALR accredited recreation, park resources and leisure services programs and 82 colleges and universities without NRPA/AALR accredited programs. The 182 colleges and universities used in the Longsdorf study were identified from higher education listings and databases provided in (a) the 2000-2001 *Curriculum Catalog* published by the Society of Park and Recreation Educators (SPRE); (b) higher education databases provided through [www.activeparks.org](http://www.activeparks.org), [www.collegesource.org](http://www.collegesource.org), [www.collegeview.com](http://www.collegeview.com); and (c) from individual college and university institutional and departmental internet web pages (390 colleges and universities were evaluated for the Longsdorf research. Evaluative criteria for inclusion into the Longsdorf study were: 1) the college or university had to be located in the U. S.;

2) the program had to offer no less than a baccalaureate degree; and 3) the program must offer a degree in recreation, park resources and leisure services. These criteria were selected based on the eligibility requirements established for NRPA/AALR accreditation. This eliminated 208 colleges or universities from the population).

### **Program Faculty Respondents**

Faculty members surveyed were identified from college and department faculty and staff listings. Only full-time faculty instructing courses in recreation, park resources and leisure services were included as potential study respondents. Verification of potential study respondents in the Longsdorf (2001) study was done by comparing college or university and department faculty listings with institutional faculty listings, and through telephone and e-mail inquiries. Six hundred ninety-four faculty members were identified, 182 were selected to respond to the study.

### **Sampling Procedures**

One full-time faculty member at each of the 182 colleges and universities was selected to receive the survey instrument. The decision to survey only one faculty member was made to maintain the population of colleges and universities identified for the study. Seventeen percent (32) of the 182 colleges and universities has only one full-time faculty member instructing recreation, park resources and leisure services courses. All programs with only one full-time faculty member were programs without NRPA/AALR accreditation. At colleges and universities where more than one full-time faculty member instructed program courses, the single full-time faculty member identified to receive the survey questionnaire was randomly selected.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

A four-page 52-item survey questionnaire used by Longsdorf (2001) was the data collection instrument. This research is an analysis of the last 11 questions of the 52-item instrument. These 11 questions were institutional and departmental characteristics concerning location of the college or university, the institutions full-time enrollment, enrollment in the recreation, park resources, and leisure services program, the number and status of faculty instructing in the program, the number, status, and rank of students enrolled in the program, degrees offered and degree options, areas of degree emphasis, rank of each faculty member, the estimated number of graduates who have taken the Certified Park and Recreation Professional Examination, and the program's current accreditation status.

## Sample Population

Each faculty member selected to participate in the Longsdorf (2001) study received a personalized University of Toledo outgoing envelope with a self-addressed and pre-stamped return envelope. Respondents also received a personalized cover letter on University of Toledo letterhead explaining the purpose of the study and a promise of confidentiality. Individuals identified as non-respondents were mailed a second cover letter indicating their non-response and a new copy of the survey questionnaire. A total of 115 out of 182 surveys were returned for a response rate of 63 percent. One hundred-six survey questionnaires were used for analysis.

## Research Question

Are there institutional and departmental variables that distinguish NRPA/AALR accredited recreation, park resources and leisure service programs from non-accredited recreation, park resources, and leisure services programs?

## Data Analysis

The statistical method used to analyze the data was Multiple Discriminant Analysis. Multiple Discriminant Analysis is used when the a priori defined dependent variable is categorical and the desire is to predict classification of a unit or subject into groups. In this case the dependent variable is nominal, accredited or non-accredited recreation, park resources, and leisure services program. A linear combination of independent variables is used to predict group membership in one of the two programs, accredited or non-accredited, by assessing the discriminant function scores. The independent variables are metric, in this case interval in scale.

## Research Findings

Five variables were entered into a stepwise discriminant function analysis to determine if a recreation, park resources and leisure service department/program could be classified into NRPA/AALR accredited or non-accredited status. The variables included in the analysis were:

- The institution's full-time enrollment during the 2000-2001 academic year.
- The total number of students in the recreation, park resources, and leisure service program during the 2000-2001 academic year full and part-time.
- The number of full-time faculty instructing recreation, park resources, and leisure service courses in the college/division.
- The total number of full-time undergraduate recreation students in the program.
- The number of graduate students in the program.

- The number of full-time students in the program.

Table 1 presents the frequency data for accreditation status for the sample population. The data indicate an almost equal distribution of accredited and non-accredited recreation, park resources, and leisure service programs in the national sample. Table 2 presents the variables entered into the stepwise discriminant procedure. Only two variables, the number of full-time faculty in recreation and the number of full-time students in the recreation, park resources and leisure service program were entered into the model.

Table 3 displays the Eigenvalue for the first canonical discriminant function used in the analysis. The dependent variable accounted for only 27.5 percent of the variance in the first function (a canonical correlation of .525 squared). The Wilks' Lambda table (Table 3) indicates that the first function was significant, Wilks' Lambda of .724, Chi-square of 13.89, significant at  $p < .05$ . The standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients are presented in Table 3. The number of full-time faculty in recreation had the strongest relationship with the function followed by the number of full-time students in the recreation, park resources and leisure services program. Group means for the function indicate that accredited programs had a function mean of .277 and non-accredited programs had a group mean of -1.316.

The original grouped cases were classified with 75.5 percent accuracy. The cross-validated results supported original accuracy levels with 67.0 percent correctly classified overall (Table 4). The results suggest that accredited recreation, park resources and leisure service programs have generally higher size of both faculty and students than non-accredited recreation, parks and leisure service's programs.

Table 1. Frequency Data for Accredited and Nonaccredited Recreation, Park Resources and Leisure Services Programs

|               | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------|
| Accredited    | 55        | 51.9    |
| Nonaccredited | 51        | 48.1    |
| Total         | 106       | 100.0   |

Table 2. Variables Entered into Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

| Step | Variable                      | Statistic | df1 | df2  | Sign. |
|------|-------------------------------|-----------|-----|------|-------|
| 1    | No. full-time faculty         | 11.55     | 1   | 44.0 | .001  |
| 2    | No. full-time students in rec | 8.20      | 2   | 43.0 | .001  |

Table 3. Summary of Canonical Discriminant Functions

| Eigenvalues                                   |               |               |                       |       |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Function                                      | Eigenvalue    | % of Variance | Canonical Correlation |       |
| 1                                             | .381          | 100.0         | .525                  |       |
| Wilks' Lambda                                 |               |               |                       |       |
| Test of Function                              | Wilks' Lambda | Chi-square    | df                    | Sign. |
| 1                                             | .724          | 13.89         | 2                     | .001  |
| Discriminant Function Coefficients Function 1 |               |               |                       |       |
| No. of full-time faculty                      | .632          |               |                       |       |
| No. of full-time students in recreation       | .592          |               |                       |       |
| Functions at Group Centroids Function 1       |               |               |                       |       |
| Accredited                                    | .277          |               |                       |       |
| Nonaccredited                                 | -1.316        |               |                       |       |

Table 4 Classification Results

| Predicted Group Membership |               |            |               |            |
|----------------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|
|                            |               | Accredited | Nonaccredited | Total      |
| Original                   | Accredited    | 35 (63.6)  | 20 (36.4)     | 55 (100.0) |
|                            | Nonaccredited | 6 (11.8)   | 45 (88.2)     | 51 (100.0) |
| Cross-Validated            | Accredited    | 35 (63.6)  | 20 (36.4)     | 55 (100.0) |
|                            | Nonaccredited | 15 (29.4)  | 36 (70.6)     | 51 (100.0) |

75.5% of original grouped cases were correctly classified.

67.0% of cross-validated grouped cases were correctly classified.

### Conclusions and Implications

This research has shown that the distinguishing variables among accredited and non-accredited recreation, park resources and leisure services programs are the program's size in terms of full-time faculty and the number of full-time students in the recreation program. Moreover, accredited programs favor a community emphasis (Chi-square=7.06, df=2,  $p<.05$ ).

Size is somewhat problematic in that smaller programs that desire accreditation seek it to achieve the visibility needed to command the attention and resources needed to provide the continued breadth and depth of coverage demanded to train persons for professional entry into the leisure services field. The data in this study indicate that 55 percent of the programs in the sample population are either not accredited or are thinking about applying for accreditation. The data further indicate that 33 percent of the programs nationwide have only one or two faculty to satisfy all of the core competencies and additional requirements required to meet minimum standards for accreditation. To strengthen smaller recreation, park resources and leisure services programs ability to achieve accreditation status, NRPA/AALR needs to facilitate or provide the additional and needed resources to achieve accredited status. Perhaps one way to add to the diversity and resources of smaller programs is through model distant learning courses based on videotapes with an e-mail component to fulfill the

competencies needed. Students enrolled in the smaller programs enroll in required distance learning courses under the guidance of the student's resident advisor. Notwithstanding the institutional and political ramifications (course fees and credit hour production), distance-learning courses could provide both the tool and the freedom necessary for faculty to pursue goals for continuing and maintaining accredited status, improve courses, expand marketing efforts, procure resources, teaching, and research. To be sufficiently attractive for recreation, park resources and leisure service programs to adopt the distance learning courses the courses need to be models of excellence that may even be adopted by accredited programs to free faculty for needed research efforts.

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