

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARTNERSHIP BEHAVIORS IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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Abstract.—The partnership phenomenon has received considerable attention as an alternative management strategy for public agencies. The growing use of partnerships has created a need to understand key elements of partnership success and failure, how partnerships address park and recreation management paradoxes, and guidelines for best practices (Mowen & Kerstetter, 2006). National Park Service (NPS) employees participated in a Internet survey (n=5,398) examining partnership attitudes and behaviors. Analysis revealed that the majority of NPS employees are currently engaged in partnerships (60 percent) and reported that their past experience was rewarding and productive (60 percent). Respondents averaged seven partnerships in the previous 5 years. From the 18 types of NPS units (i.e. National Parks, National Battlefields, National Monuments, etc.), three groups were identified for this analysis. Achieving a better understanding of the scope, motivations, and perceived limitations of engaging in partnerships will be important to the NPS in meeting the demands of providing access to, and protecting resources, in times of fiscal constraint.

1.0 BACKGROUND

The current political culture of fiscal constraint and “doing more with less” has caused a groundswell of interest in collaborative, partnering, and resource sharing arrangements among park and recreation service providers (Selin & Myers, 1995). The pressures for more efficient government and increased citizen involvement have resulted in the movement toward more effective management of common resources. Partnerships offer innovative strategies for managing public resources and agencies, as well as empowering people to solve common problems. Collaborative agreements allow government agencies, communities, and private groups to build bridges between one another that enable them to deal with common problems and create forward-thinking strategies (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). Partnership offers a process to increase involvement through democratic means and provide a viable approach for expanding the range of services offered, enhancing the opportunities of park visitors, and building a sense of community pride (Vaske et al., 1995).

Partnership has been defined by various authors in different fields of literature who generally refer to it as the voluntary pooling of resources between two or more parties to achieve collaborative goals (Yoder & Ham, 1999). Wood and Gray (1991) refer to collaboration as groups of autonomous stakeholders that engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures to act or decide on issues related to a particular problem. However, the term partnership is a broad label that describes various types of interpersonal, relational, and organizational transactions (Mowen & Kerstetter, 2006; Yoder & Ham, 1999). The gaps in the consistency of partnership terminology lead to confusion in defining collaborative relationships and systematically evaluating the impact of partnership activities (Cousens et al., 2006).

Despite issues with partnership terminology and clear partnership organization and evaluation processes, partnerships are becoming increasingly important in the management of public agencies, specifically parks and recreation service providers. With diminished public resources and an expanding, demanding, and increasingly diverse constituency, public agencies must seek assistance from commercial and non-profit organizations to operate (Mowen & Kerstetter, 2006). Furthermore, concerns for public welfare, including environmental degradation, obesity, and juvenile delinquency, to name a few, are problems that no one organization or government agency can solve alone. The public is impatient and dissatisfied with government performance and is demanding the revitalization of responsible government practices (Osborne, 1993). Today's government is therefore under extreme pressure from the public to be more productive and efficient. Words like rethink, rebuild, revitalize, restructure, and reinvent carry clear messages from the public that the federal, state, and local governments must deliver services more efficiently to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing society and to restore public trust (Callahan & Holzer, 1994). Citizens' heightened awareness of broader social issues are creating demands to find solutions to financial, human, and capital problems through alternative methods such as collaborative agreements. Through collaboration, traditional park and recreation providers are repositioning themselves to provide goods and services that address broader social missions while supporting their agencies (Mowen & Kerstetter, 2006).

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The growing practice of building partnerships has created a need to understand key elements of partnership success and failure, how partnerships address park and recreation management paradoxes, and guidelines for best practices (Mowen & Kerstetter, 2006). In the past 20 years, knowledge of partnerships has grown exponentially. Yet, despite the growing literature, few systemic empirical partnership assessments have been pursued. This study investigates the potential for parkland managers to

implement partnership and collaborative strategies to support their parks and determine partnership training and development priorities for National Park Service (NPS) employees. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to determine partnership training and development priorities for NPS employees by obtaining baseline data regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as partnership attitudes that will identify existing and future training needs of employees and partners associated with NPS partnerships work.

3.0 METHODS

The study focused on NPS employees. The NPS provided the database of contact information of NPS employees for this study. Based on a thorough review of the partnership literature in various fields of study and discussions with NPS management personnel, an Internet-based survey instrument was developed. Care was taken to identify those variables found to influence partnership behavior by examining previous studies, in terms of both motivations and perceived constraints to partnering. Moreover, an exhaustive list of employee competencies pertaining to partnerships was developed by NPS professionals, reviewed by a team of researchers, and then incorporated into the instrument. The survey instrument was administered using the Online Questionnaire Authoring Tool (OnQ). Methods outlined by Dillman (2000) were modified for survey design. The survey included questions regarding: demographics, knowledge, skills, and abilities; past and present partnership experience; future partnership intent; and partnership attitudes.

A total of 18,224 names were selected to participate in the study. The survey was viewed by 7,041 employees and a total of 5,398 usable surveys were downloaded. Out of the 18,224 employees, 39 percent of them viewed the survey while 29 percent of them completed it. Out of the 7,041 employees who viewed the survey, 76 percent of them finished the survey. The overwhelming majority (97 percent) were permanent, full-time employees who averaged 18 years of service in the agency and 21 years in the federal government. The average respondent was 49 years old, white

(84 percent), male (58 percent), and had a completed a bachelor's degree or higher (77 percent).

4.0 RESULTS

From the 18 types of NPS units (i.e. National Parks, National Battlefields, National Monuments, etc.), three groups were identified for this analysis. These groups were: 1) "National Parks"; 2) other units within the National Parks System (including historic, recreation area, lakeshore, etc.); and 3) managerial support units including regional and Washington offices. The highest percent of survey respondents (45 percent) worked in "other" units in the NPS, while 34 percent worked in the icon 'National' parks, and the least (21 percent) worked in NPS managerial support units (Table 1).

Respondents were asked to quantify how many partnerships they had been involved with in the preceding 5 years, regardless of agency affiliation. Overall, respondents reported participating in an average of 7 partnerships over the past 5 years. Across the three groups, "National Parks" respondents reported the lowest average number of partnerships (5), other units reported an average of 7 partnerships and NPS managerial support units reported 10 partnerships, on average.

Past experience with partnerships was described as 'rewarding' by 60 percent or more of respondents in all three groups (Table 2). Both National Parks (16 percent) and other NPS units (17 percent) were similar in reporting past partnership experiences as difficult, frustrating, or not very productive, while only 12 percent of NPS managerial support units reported this. Less than 28 percent of all park units reported having

Table 1.—Frequency distribution of park unit respondents

Response of Park Units	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
National Parks	1,821	34%
Other National Park System Units	2,419	45%
Managerial Support Units	1,158	21%
Total	5,398	100%

no experience working with partnerships.

Currently, 60 percent of the National Parks employees, 62 percent of employees from other park units, and 69 percent of employees in NPS managerial support units reported being in one or more partnerships (Table 3). However, approximately 40 percent of respondents from each park unit reported not currently being engaged in any partnership activity.

The overwhelming majority of respondents in all park units expected to be engaged in one or more partnerships in the future; however, differences between groups emerged for the 'belief that they will be involved in partnerships in the future because it is the best way to conduct park business.' Thirty-two percent of respondents from National Parks agreed, while 35 percent of respondents from other park units agreed, and 39 percent of respondents from NPS managerial support offices felt the same (Table 4). However, approximately 12 percent of respondents from each of the three groups reported that they would avoid becoming involved in partnerships if they could help it.

Table 2.—Past partnership behaviors with organizations outside of the NPS

Past partnership behaviors	National Parks	Other National Park System units	Managerial support units
I have no experience working with partnerships	23%	21%	27%
My past experience working with partnerships was difficult, frustrating, and not very productive	16%	17%	12%
My past experience working with partnerships was rewarding and productive	61%	62%	61%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 3.—Current partnership experiences with organizations outside of the NPS

Current partnership behaviors	National Parks	Other National Park System units	Managerial support units
I am not currently engaged in any partnership activity with the NPS	40%	38%	41%
I am engaged in one partnership program/project	23%	20%	18%
I am engaged in multiple partnerships programs/projects	37%	42%	41%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 4.—Future Partnership Intent with Organizations outside of the NPS

Future partnership intent	National Parks	Other National Park System units	Managerial support units
I will try to avoid becoming involved in a partnership if I can	12%	12%	11%
I expect to be engaged in one or more partnerships because this will be a primary way the NPS will conduct park business in the future	56%	53%	50%
I intend to be engaged in one or more partnerships because I believe this is a better way to conduct park business in the future	32%	35%	39%
Total	100%	100%	100%

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Understanding partnership attitudes and behaviors are increasingly important in managing our national parks as government fiscal climates change and budget cuts are implemented. Current partnership behaviors may have impacts on the NPS promoting partnership as a fiscal solution in the future; it is therefore important to gain an understanding of present attitudes. Overall, the majority of NPS employees is currently engaged in partnerships and intends to be engaged in one or partnerships in the future. However, partnership behaviors vary little depending on type of park unit. This finding reveals that regardless of park unit type, partnerships are a widely used management tool in the NPS. Employees generally hold a positive attitude about partnerships and intend to engage in them in the future. Further examination of study results by other variables including position type or region may yield more insightful results for future training.

6.0 CITATIONS

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