A COMPARISON OF THE OF THE PERCEIVED RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF COUNCIL ON ACCREDITATION CURRICULUM STANDARDS BETWEEN ACADEMICIANS AND PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION ADMINISTRATORS

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Abstract

An important factor in developing an effective curriculum is the need for academicians to understand the breadth of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to engage in professional practice. Previous and recent research indicates that academicians may need a better understanding of the breadth of mastery needed by students in certain NRPA identified professional competency areas. The purpose of the current study was to compare academician's perceptions of the level of competence being received by graduates to public park and recreation administrator's perceptions of the level of competence needed for professional practice. The study identified that discrepancies exist between the views of academicians and practitioners as to what is the critical education undergraduates need in order to become successful practitioners. Results further indicate that professional preparation programs should focus more heavily on developing student competence in administration and management.

1.0 Introduction

The stability of any profession is maintained through a profession's ability to prepare competent individuals who can successfully engage in professional practice. As such, profession's strive to produce leaders who are competent, current, and informed (Sessoms 1998a). In order to accomplish this outcome, a profession must take measures to ensure that its professional preparation programs provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for professional practice. This is generally done using specialized accreditation. Primarily, specialized accreditors use specific competency standards to assess an academic program's ability to demonstrate that its graduates possess the competencies (i.e. knowledge, skill, abilities) recognized as essential for entry-level practice in the specialized accreditor's profession (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA] 2002).

Within the recreation, park resources and leisure services profession, competencies recognized as essential for entry-level practice are reflected in the Professional Competencies (Series Standards 8.00) of the Standards of Evaluative Criteria for Baccalaureate Programs in Recreation, Park Resources and Leisure Services (National Recreation and Park Association [NRPA], 2000). The Professional Competency series encompasses 42 criterion-referenced standards classified into eight specific competency areas. These competency areas include: Conceptual Foundations; Leisure Services Profession; Leisure Services Delivery Systems; Programming Strategies; Assessment, Planning and Evaluation; Administration and Management; Legislative and Legal Aspects; and Field Experience. These standards represent the core areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities graduates should posses upon entry into the profession, and also the criteria a professional preparation program should meet in order to provide an educational experience consistent with the profession's standards of practice (Sessoms 1998b). Formally adopted by the National Recreation and Park Association/American Association of Leisure and Recreation (NRPA/AALR) sponsored Council on Accreditation in 1975 (NRPA 1975), these standards serve as a guide for the development of recreation, park resources and leisure services undergraduate curriculum.

However, because the Professional Competency series standards are criterion-referenced their use as a guide for professional preparation does have limitations. One limitation is that criterion-referenced standards represent minimum proficiency or competency (Baumgartner, Strong, & Hensley, 2002). A second limitation is that criterion-referenced standards commonly do not discern a relative standing or comparison (Lundgren & Farrell, 1985). As a result, academicians commonly face the challenge of determining the extent or breadth at which specific areas of competency should be covered in their professional preparation curriculum. For example, is a student better served by a greater breadth of study related to the conceptual foundations of play, recreation, and leisure or a greater breadth of study related to the assessment, planning, and evaluation of leisure services? Further, is a student better served by a greater breadth of study related to programming strategies than both conceptual foundations or assessment, planning, and evaluation?

Previous research indicates that the profession has had difficulty answering these questions. In examining competency and continuing education needs, Hulverson (1979) and Henderson (1982) identified that deficiencies in preparation for professional practice were evident within the profession. Reporting on the proceedings of the National Curriculum Conference, held as part of the 1998 Annual NRPA Congress, Sessoms (1998a) indicated that there was evidence to support that deficiencies in professional preparation continues to be evident. According to Sessoms, "there currently appears to be a discrepancy among the views of educators and practitioners as to what is the critical education undergraduates need in order to become successful practitioners" (p. 23). Further expanding on the issue, Sessoms highlighted research presented that concluded that graduates were not receiving the preparation needed in competency areas such as assessment, planning and evaluation, administration and management, and legislative and legal matters.

An important factor in developing an effective professional preparation curriculum is the need for academicians to understand the level(s) of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to effectively engage in professional practice. This understanding serves to better ensure that academic preparation (actual knowledge, skill, and ability acquisition) parallels required competencies for professional practice (needed knowledge, skill, and ability). As such, the purpose of the current study was to compare academician's perceptions of the level(s) of competence received by graduates of recreation, park resources and leisure services professional preparation programs with public park and recreation administrator's perceptions of the level(s) of competence required for professional practice based on NRPA identified Professional Competencies. Specifically, the current study was conducted to examine: a) whether or not deficiencies in professional preparation are still evident in the profession; and b) whether or not discrepancies between academicians and practitioners as to what is critical in undergraduate education are still evident in the profession.

2.0 Method

The current study is a comparative analysis between academician's perceptions of the academic preparation of recreation, park resources and leisure services students collected by Longsdorf (2001) and public park and

recreation administrator's perceptions of the preparation needed for professional practice in recreation, park resources and leisure services collected in 2003.

2.1 Instrumentation

The author developed the measurement instrument used to collect both sets of data. Content items included in the measurement instrument were developed from the Professional Competencies (Series Standards 8.00) of the Standards and Evaluative Criteria for Baccalaureate Programs in Recreation, Park Resources, and Leisure Services (NRPA, 2000) and the testing domains outlined in the Official Study Guide for the Certified Park and Recreation Professional Examination (Rossman & McKinney 2000). These references guided the development of the content items of the measurement instrument that addressed at minimum three professional competencies related to: Conceptual Foundations; Leisure Services Profession; Leisure Services Delivery Systems; Programming Strategies; Assessment, Planning and Evaluation; Administration and Management; Legislative and Legal Aspects. Validity of the survey questionnaire was verified by the authors' decision to adopt NRPA published Professional Competency standards. Reliability testing for all scaled content items was done using a test-retest procedure for both academicians and practitioners. Reliability was measured using Pearson's r correlation coefficients. The responses to the 34 scaled content items were summed to create a total score. The scores on this scale were found to have acceptable reliability (r = .79) for academicians and acceptable reliability (r = .77) for practitioners.

2.2 Sample Selection

The population of colleges and universities in the 2001 study consisted of 182 colleges and universities offering degrees in recreation, park resources and leisure services in the U.S. The population included 100 NRPA/AALR accredited programs and 82 colleges without NRPA/AALR accreditation. Evaluative criteria to be included in the 2001 study were: a) the college or university had to be located in the U.S.; b) the professional preparation program had to offer no less than a baccalaureate degree, and c) the professional preparation program had to confer a degree in recreation, park resources and leisure services. From the 150 colleges and universities identified that met the study criteria that had more than one full time academician instructing recreation, park resources and leisure services courses, one academician from each

Table 1.—Professional Competency Area Percentile Ranks: Academicians

Competency Area	Composite Mean	Weighted Mean	Standard Score	z Value	Percentage	Percentile Rank
Conceptual Foundations	16.32	1.02	.41	.3409	34.09	65.91
Leisure Services Profession	16.38	1.02	.48	.3156	31.56	68.44
Leisure Services Delivery System	11.71	.976	-.54	.2946	29.46	29.46
Programming Strategies	12.98	1.08	1.73	.0418	4.18	95.82
Assessment, Planning and Evaluation	26.79	.957	-.94	.1736	17.36	17.36
Administration & Management	32.11	1.00	.06	.4761	47.61	52.39
Legislative and Legal Aspects	15.11	.945	-1.20	.1151	11.51	11.51

Note: Areas under standard normal curve for values of z to compute percentile rank were identified from Fisher, R.A. & Yates, F. (1974). Statistical tables for biological, agricultural and medical research. (6th ed.). In Hinkle, D.E., Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S.G. (1994). Applied statistics for the behavioral sciences. (3rd ed.). Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin.

institution was randomly selected to participate in the study. Thirty-two colleges and universities identified for the study had only one full time academician instructing recreation, park resources and leisure services courses. The 2001 study collecting academician data, following two mailings, yielded an actual response rate of 63% and a useable response rate of 52% (n = 96) for analysis in the current study.

The population of practitioners sampled in 2003 included 600 administrators operating public park and recreation agencies from across the United States. The population of practitioners selected for the current study was randomly identified from a database of administrators registered as members with the NRPA. In order to be eligible to participate in the study a respondent had to be employed at the time the survey instrument was received as the director, supervisor, or administrator of the public park and recreation agency in which the measurement instrument was addressed. Out of the 600 respondents identified for the study 567 met the study criteria. An initial and follow-up mailing of the measurement instrument yielded 331 responses, an actual response rate of 58%. Twenty-eight of the survey instruments returned were removed from the study due to incomplete or unusable data, which yielded a usable response rate of 53% (n = 303).

2.3 Data Analysis

Each Professional Competency area had its own scale from which its composite mean and composite standard deviation was derived. This was due to the variable number of questions comprising each Professional Competency area on the measurement instrument.

Composite means were able to be used to test for significant differences between academician's perceptions of the competencies received in recreation, park resources and leisure services professional preparation programs and practitioner's perceptions of the competencies needed for professional practice. However, in order to facilitate a comparison of the importance of each individual Professional Competency area as perceived by academicians and practitioners, the composite mean of each Professional Competency area was adjusted for scale range to yield a weighted mean. The adjustment to weighted means allowed for each weighted mean to be converted to a standard score, reflecting each individual competency area's percentile rank.

The above described data analysis procedures were done using SPSS statistical software. All data reported in the result section was analyzed and reported as grouped data. Only measurement instruments with no missing points of data were included in the study analysis.

3.0 Results

The results of this study are presented in four tables. Table 1 reports the percentile rank of each Professional Competency area as reported by academicians. Table 2 reports the percentile rank of each Professional Competency area as reported by practitioners. Table 3 presents a comparison of the percentile rank of each Professional Competency area as reported by both academicians and practitioners. Table 4 reports t Test results comparing academician's perceptions of actual preparation for professional practice to practitioner's perceptions of needed preparation for professional practice.

Table 2.—Professional Competency Area Percentile Ranks: Practitioners

Competency Area	Composite Mean	Weighted Mean	Standard Score	z Value	Percentage	Percentile Rank
Conceptual Foundations	15.24	.952	-.78	.2177	21.77	21.77
Leisure Services Profession	15.42	.964	-.50	.3085	30.85	30.85
Leisure Services Delivery System	11.47	.956	-.70	.2420	24.20	24.20
Programming Strategies	12.47	1.04	1.32	.0934	9.34	90.66
Assessment, Planning & Evaluation	26.65	.952	-.79	.2148	21.48	21.48
Administration & Management	34.26	1.07	2.09	.0183	1.83	98.17
Legislative & Legal Aspects	15.33	.958	-.64	.2611	26.11	26.11

Note: Areas under standard normal curve for values of z to compute percentile rank were identified from Fisher, R.A. & Yates, F. (1974). Statistical tables for biological, agricultural and medical research. (6th ed.). In Hinkle, D.E., Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S.G. (1994). Applied statistics for the behavioral sciences. (3rd ed.). Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin.

Table 3.—Professional Competency Area Percentile Rank Comparison: Academicians v. Practitioners

Competency Area	Academician Percentile Rank	Practitioner Percentile Rank
Conceptual Foundations	65.91	21.77
Leisure Services Profession	68.44	30.85
Leisure Services Delivery System	29.46	24.20
Programming Strategies	95.82	90.66
Assessment, Planning & Evaluation	17.36	21.48
Administration & Management	52.39	98.17
Legislative & Legal Aspects	11.51	26.11

Table 4.—T-Test Results: Competency Perceptions

Competency Area	Academicians[a] (M)	(SD)	Practitioners[b] (M)	(SD)	t	p
Conceptual Foundations	15.24	2.69	16.32	2.83	(397) = -3.40	*.001
Leisure Services Profession	15.42	2.24	16.38	2.51	(397) = -3.52	*.000
Leisure Services Delivery Systems	11.47	1.98	11.71	2.21	(397) = -1.00	.316
Programming Strategies	12.47	1.78	12.97	1.60	(397) = -2.50	*.013
Assessment Planning and Evaluation	26.65	3.66	26.79	4.47	(397) = -0.31	.779
Administration & Management	34.26	3.90	32.11	4.93	(397) = 4.40	*.000
Legislative and Legal Aspects	15.32	2.51	15.11	3.05	(397) = 0.68	.537

[a]n = 96   [b]n = 303
*p < .05

4.0 Conclusions

Results from this study indicate that possible deficiencies still exist within recreation, park resources and leisure services professional preparation programs and that discrepancies still exist between academicians and practitioners as to what is critical in undergraduate education. Based on the comparisons made between the two sets of data, recreation, park resources and leisure services students are receiving greater competency in the conceptual foundations, the leisure services profession, and programming strategies than may be actually needed for professional practice. Further, results indicate that students may be receiving a deficient level of the competency in administration and management. These results should not be interpreted to indicate that less value should be placed on ensuring student competency in the areas of the conceptual foundations of play, recreation and leisure, the leisure

services profession, and programming strategies, but interpreted to indicate that professional preparation programs need to strengthen their students administrative and management competencies. Overall, results from this study indicate our professional preparation programs need to do a better job at ensuring students possess the following: strong communication skills; an understanding of administration and management concepts; an understanding of techniques related to budget, finance, and fiscal accountability; the ability to make application of marketing, public relations and other promotion techniques and strategies; an understanding of administrative and operational methods and procedures; the ability to make application of personnel management techniques and; strong computer skills.

5.0 Citations

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