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# An Academic Program for Resort Managers

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## AN ACADEMIC PROGRAM FOR RESORT MANAGERS

BY

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### ABSTRACT

Academic departments of park and recreation resources have recently moved to establish majors in commercial recreation in response to fewer job opportunities in the public sector combined with a lessening of demand from students for the traditional natural resource management career.

It is proposed that a marketable career option for commercial recreation graduates is resort management. Resorts combine three elements—management of the natural resource base; management of guest activities; management of services. Because of the expertise in the first two areas found in departments of park and recreation resources a joint program with a hotel school, which provides education in the management of food and lodging, would ensure a graduate with the skills and education necessary to meet the challenge of resort management.

## AN ACADEMIC PROGRAM FOR RESORT MANAGERS

### COMMERCIAL RECREATION GROWTH

In the past several years, interest has grown in the development of curricula in commercial recreation. This has occurred because of two inter-related movements. During the 1970s, taxpayer disillusionment with big government and high taxes led to demands for reduced government spending and increased accountability in the public sector. Recreational services was one of the affected areas. At the same time, student sentiment was changing. The rate of growth of those interested in management of the natural resource environment as a career choice—a rate which had increased dramatically during the 1960s—was levelling off. Fewer students were being attracted to the field at the same time that fewer opportunities in the public sector existed. Those positions that were available would require a greater knowledge of the techniques of business management to accommodate increasing calls for accountability.

While supply and demand seemed to be in reasonable balance, academic park and recreation departments had been enlarged on the basis of considerable increases in the number of students and available positions. Retrenchment is difficult. To maintain their size and viability, as well

as to respond to the gradually changing needs of their market, these departments began to develop an option in commercial recreation.

## THE SCOPE OF COMMERCIAL RECREATION

As with any new idea, various thoughts have emerged as to what commercial recreation is and what a student in this field is suited for upon graduation. There is general agreement that commercial recreation deals with recreational facilities operated in the private or commercial sector, as distinct from the public sector. Beyond that, the concept of educating or training someone to work in "commercial recreation" becomes somewhat hazy.

A rather abstract view suggests that commercial recreation involves enterprises featuring the following: facilities and areas for self-directed activities; facilities for entertainment purposes; some type of instructional services; and the manufacturing and marketing of a commodity and enterprises for leisure consumption.(1) It would seem that these classifications could apply equally to public and commercial recreation.

It has also been suggested that commercial recreation comprises clubs, both city and country clubs; resorts, whose base might be sun, water, snow, serenity, or training; entertainment centers, primarily for either spectators or participants; and attractions or amusement parks, general or specialized.(2)

Another view of commercial recreation emerges from studying the competencies necessary for employment in the field. Several years ago, a jury of experts identified the main ones required of commercial recreation majors:

understanding of tourist trends and patterns

the effect of mobility patterns on commercial recreation

how commercial recreation is affected by lodging and food service problems

the philosophy of commercial recreation operators

how to recognize and analyze problems

the legal aspects of liability

the ability to relate problem solving to the overall objectives of the organization

the study of economics at the macro and micro level

a working knowledge of various aspects of running a business, including finance, marketing, and insurance (3)

A basic concept, then, of commercial recreation is that the organization operating the facility is doing so in order to make a profit. The distinction between public and commercial becomes confusing, however, when one considers the increasing tendency to charge fees for various parts of the recreational experience provided by the public sector which previously were provided at no charge. High schools are charging pupils for trying out on the football team. Approximately half of the nation's ski areas are located on publicly owned land. The traditional position for interpreters, that of park ranger, is expanding to cover interpretation in museums, historical attractions, and businesses. How do we distinguish between the skills necessary to work in the public sector and in the private or commercial sector?

#### A CAREER PATH FOR COMMERCIAL RECREATION GRADUATES

While positions in the public sector of recreation are moving in the direction of requiring more business or "commercial" skills, students who presently opt for a commercial recreation focus have no clear-cut career path. They are trying to acquire business knowledge as it applies to recreation, yet their business education is weaker than that of students graduating from a college of business. In marketing a product or service, we teach students to concentrate on its unique selling point and to appeal to the appropriate segment of the market. Can this principle of marketing be applied to the commercial recreation curriculum?

The background given by a typical academic department of park and recreation resources is unique in several ways. First, the student has in-depth knowledge of the planning, management, and maintenance of the natural resource base for recreation. Second, many departments offer education in the organization of recreational activities. Third, students are exposed to the principles and practices of interpretation. Fourth, students either enter the program with or develop before leaving an ethic toward the natural resource base ranging from that of a preservationist to one who accepts the need for wise development sufficient to ensure public satisfaction while maintaining the long-term integrity of the natural resource base.

These four outputs of a student's education, found in graduates of departments of park and recreation resources, target the student to a career in resort management.

#### RESORT ATTRACTIONS AND FACILITIES

Resorts represent a combination of attractions and facilities. The aspects attracting guests to the resort are the extent and quality of the recreational facilities offered. Generally, people travel to a resort for these features, not because of the quality of the rooms or the desirability of the cuisine. The director of marketing of the Camelback Inn has said that a resort cannot be operated successfully unless it offers attractive recreation. Pannell, Kerr, Forster and Company, a respected authority on hospitality management, notes that resorts essentially appeal to three market segments.<sup>(7)</sup> First, people seeking short--term vacations are looking for a variety of recreational

activities, and their choice of destination will be affected by what is offered. Second, the tourist segment views the resort facility as a destination. The length of stay is affected by the extent of the resort's facilities and those in the surrounding area. Third, the conference and business meeting segment is seeking a work-play atmosphere, hoping that the resort's recreational activities will invigorate attendees and result in more productive work at the conference and back at the office. If one recognizes the importance of recreational facilities to the successful operation of a resort, then one recognizes the value of a commercial recreation graduate.

This value becomes more apparent when the cost of recreational facilities in a resort's operation is considered. In 1980, property operation and maintenance averaged 5.6 percent of revenue for U.S. resorts. This was greater than either energy costs (4.3 percent of revenue) or marketing costs (4.2 percent of revenue). An 18-hole golf course at a resort may require equipment worth more than \$150,000 for maintaining the course, and management may spend more than \$10,000 per hole in annual maintenance.

The extent of the recreational facilities at a property can be seen by considering the profile of an "average" resort, as determined by a survey of 50 properties done by Resort Management magazine.(8) The average resort has 285 rooms, an 18-hole golf course, 65 golf carts, a pro golf shop, eight tennis courts (two indoors), a tennis pro shop, two swimming pools (one indoors), boating and sailing, a variety of other recreational activities, and a children's director and playground.

The recreation graduate leaves college with a true appreciation for the importance of the natural resource base and the value of recreation to the individual. This ethic fits in well with the importance of recreational facilities to resort operation.

#### GUEST ACTIVITIES

While the recreational facilities attract guests, the resort then provides various services to meet the guest's needs away from home. People must be fed, lodged, and entertained. The importance of the entertainment function, called guest relations or guest activities, becomes more crucial as the length of stay increases. This area also calls for the knowledge of the recreation graduate. The principles and practices learned from administering community recreation services can readily be applied to the organization of guest activities. More appropriate and even higher quality delivery of such services is likely through individuals skilled in the techniques of interpretation. Traditionally of the park ranger type, the role of interpreter is broadening to emphasize methods of interpretation as well as subject knowledge. This shift in emphasis makes interpreters' as well as subject knowledge. This shift in emphasis makes interpreters' skills transferrable to museum, historical attractions, factories or resorts.

#### A MODEL CURRICULUM

One model of resort management suggests that what is involved is the management of the natural resource based upon which the very existence of the operation depends, the management of guest activities, and the management of lodging, food, and beverage services (see Figure 1). The latter area, taught through hotel schools operating as a department of a college of business or as a separate school within the university, has been the traditional career route for resort managers. Few, if any, come to their job with a knowledge of managing the recreational activities and natural resource base upon which their resort depend. Yet, there is limited support in the industry for this type of background. In a study done by this author, respondents in a national sample of large ski areas preferred a college graduate with a business major for the position of ski area manager.(5) Even so, a recreational administration major was specified by more than 10 percent of the respondents. The expertise desired in ski area managers combined a knowledge of business functions with specialized recreational management and maintenance functions. Expertise in general management techniques was listed first. The remaining top areas consisted of knowledge of accounting for the control of ticket sales and labor costs; marketing as it related to the pricing of tickets; the selection and maintenance of lift equipment; the application of safety regulations, necessitating an understanding of liability; and the management of personnel.

In an earlier study of resort managers, Bill McKenzie asked participants to select from a list of course titles those they would want their employees to have had.(4) The major areas chosen related to guest activities (recreation programming and leadership, and leadership, and outdoor sports programming), recreation management (sports and recreation facility management, philosophy of recreation, aquatics facilities management, and field visitation in commercial recreation), and business management (personnel management, wage and salary administration, public relations, conference planning, and food and beverage management).

From the few industry surveys available, and given the unique background offered by academic departments of park and recreation resources, it is suggested that a viable career for commercial recreation students lies in resort management. It offers graduates an opportunity to capitalize upon their unique background. It also is a career direction narrow enough to target toward (compared to the rather vague "commercial recreation"), yet it is broad enough to offer numerous employment opportunities.

An appropriate program of study should combine lodging, food, and beverage management; recreation resource management; and recreation programming. An example is the one developed by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities.(6) From extended group sessions with resort managers, a list of competencies for the position of resort manager was prepared. These were then structured into a learning sequence, appropriate courses were suggested, and a program was fashioned. The committee recommended that a two-semester resort recreation program be offered (90 hours of instruction) on a selective basis in two or three colleges. A prerequisite for an eventual Resort Management Certificate would be completion of the four-semester hotel management program (1,860 hours of instruction).

This is only one possible model suitable for junior colleges. Similar programs could be developed in the United States if demand warrants. The success of commercial recreation programs will depend upon a formal or informal link with a college of business or hotel school and

a narrowing of career direction from the rather nebulous "commercial recreation" to resort management.

#### REFERENCES

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SUGGESTED CURRICULUM - RESORT MANAGEMENT

Total Program	180 Quarter Hours
University and College requirements and electives	120 Quarter Hours
Remaining in the major	60 Quarter Hours
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	180 Quarter Hours

Major

Service Management	36 Quarter Hours
Guest Activities	12 Quarter Hours
Recreation Resort Management	12 Quarter Hours
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	60 Quarter Hours

Service Management (36 hours)

Tourism and the Hospitality Environment (4)  
 Sanitation and safety (4)  
 Food Production Systems (4)  
 Food Service Systems (4)  
 Hospitality Law (4)  
 Design and Layout of Hospitality Facilities (4)  
 Financial Management for the Hospitality Industry (4)  
 Hospitality Industry Marketing (4)  
 Human Resource Management (4)

Guest Activities (12)

Principles of interpretation (4)  
 Recreation Program Planning (4)  
 Recreation for Special Groups (4)

Recreation Resort Management (12)

Planning Recreation Facilities (4)  
 Outdoor Recreation Management (4)  
 Maintenance of Recreation Facilities (4)

Figure 1.

