

## Bridging the Sport and Recreation Divide

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### Abstract

In this article we examine sport and recreation's collaborative potential. We begin by identifying some differences between the two fields of study and by acknowledging what heretofore have been some inherent incompatibilities. We discuss how these differences and incompatibilities might be overcome through a paradigm shift based on the fields' common appreciation of the importance of play. We then demonstrate the collaborative potential by illustrating the relevance of play to ameliorating the pervasive obesity problem confronting contemporary society. We conclude by suggesting that an alliance between sport and recreation may result in synergistic effects that strengthen their respective standing within higher education by enhancing contributions to public policy formation, opening new avenues for research, increasing opportunities for research funding, and improving academic offerings.

**KEYWORDS:** sport management, recreation education, collaboration, cross-leveraging, synergy

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Two years ago in *Schole*, Dan Dustin and Keri Schwab (2008) described a tense relationship between sport management and recreation education. They characterized sport management as an area of study that is often welcomed into recreation departments at great expense to the host curriculum. More recently, in response to Laurence Chalip's Butler Lecture opening the Leisure Research Symposium at the National Recreation and Park Association Congress in Salt Lake City, Dustin and Schwab (2009) extended their concern to seemingly fundamental ideological differences between the two fields of study. They reasoned that sport management focuses primarily on providing sport-as-an-entertainment service, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a "nation of onlookers" (Nash, 1932), while recreation focuses on the provision of sport-as-a-participation service, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a nation of active enthusiasts.

Dustin and Schwab (2008) concluded that academic programs in recreation should protect themselves from the incursions of sport management. Sport management programs should be kept at arm's length from recreation departments, and the interaction between faculty members and students in the two programs should be minimized. But Dustin and Schwab also conceded that in many colleges and universities, the marriage between sport management and recreation education has already taken place, and that the challenge for those institutions and any others contemplating such a marriage is how to make it work. This is the challenge we consider here. If sport and recreation can identify appropriate paradigms and shared directions for research and teaching, then perhaps there is hope for a long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationship.

### **Finding Common Purpose**

There are significant grounds for finding common purpose, and the fields may have more in common than we typically assume. The study of sport and the study of recreation share comparatively low levels of academic status that are represented in several ways. In most institutions, salaries are lower for faculty who study sport or recreation than are salaries for faculty who study similar phenomena under more prestigious labels, such as business, psychology, or biology. Perhaps as a consequence, faculty members in departments that focus on sport have sometimes worked to break up their departments so that they could be relocated to more prestigious academic units, such as medicine or business. As a result, we have witnessed the elimination of departments variously called "physical education" or "kinesiology" at many of our leading institutions, including (but not exclusively) the universities of Massachusetts, Washington, and California. Similarly, recreation departments have also been vulnerable to elimination, as evidenced by the demise of such well-regarded programs as those at the universities of Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon, and Florida State.

To be sure, whenever a department of sport or recreation has been eliminated through restructuring or direct cuts, the decision has been legitimized by reference to academic quality or centrality to institutional mission. The underlying status issues have remained *sub rosa*. Yet the very reference to quality and institutional mission are implicit declarations that our universities hold the study of recreation and the study of sport in low regard. The fact that some faculty members, particularly in comprehensive departments of "physical education" and "kinesiology," have welcomed (and sometimes

even encouraged) restructuring that relocates them to more prestigious departments demonstrates that our own faculty give credence to the very systems of academic prestige that relegate them to the lowest rungs.

On the face of it, this is surprising given the widely cited studies arguing the importance of sport, recreation, and leisure. Pieper (1963), for example, argued that cultural elaboration and development are, in fact, grounded in leisure. The classic works of Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (1961) contend that play is fundamental to human development, human social organization, and human expression. Anthropologists have also noted that cultures are celebrated, scrutinized, and sometimes even changed through recreational engagements, particularly playful performance (Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1974).

A closer consideration of these works highlights the underlying basis for the low prestige shared by sport studies (including sport management) and leisure research (including parks and recreation management): Sport and recreation fall under the rubric of “play.” Despite some fairly trenchant arguments that much of modern sport has lost its playfulness (e.g., Brohm, 1978; Rigauer, 1981), the very lexicon we use to talk about sport and recreation relegates them to the domain of play. In the popular imagination, play is the stuff of childhood, or when practiced by adults, it is perceived as a mere escape from the important and serious business of daily life. Historically, religious movements that helped to found the United States distrusted play, and sometimes banned adults (and even children) from its practice (Brailsford, 1975; Seccombe, 1739). It is no wonder, then, that any academic discipline elevating play to serious study finds itself relegated to low status. The very cultural values within which such study is embedded mandate the relegation. Sport and recreation share that relegation, and so long as the two operate in separate silos, or contend with one another for resources or pride of place, the fundamental cultural presuppositions that trivialize them remain unassailed. Like the Roman colonies of ancient times, sport studies and leisure studies remain low in status because they are divided.

Our poor status is further reinforced by the ways we isolate the phenomena we study. Recreation curricula do not yet adequately consider the ways that recreation interacts with non-recreation industries, or the practical implications of work showing that cultures are constructed and changed through play (cf. Chalip, 2006). Similarly, sport management curricula, particularly in the United States, are typically limited to the study of entertainment sport, particularly professional sport leagues and the NCAA (primarily Division I). Yet the economic data ranking sport as one of the nation’s largest industries also show that the overwhelming majority of impact comes from recreational sport and the economic activity it stimulates (Meek, 1997). Sport management’s very justification as an academic discipline is thus grounded in its relationship to recreation.

The intellectual separation of sport and recreation from the rest of life further trivializes them. It is reaffirming to establish our own journals and to ensconce departments of parks and recreation in our public institutions—departments that are run separately from education, social welfare, and economic development. It is reaffirming to see that sport has its own sections of the newspaper, its own place in news broadcasts, and its own radio and television stations. But there is a more telling reality to notice. These are all manifestations of separateness. Our history has taught us a lot about being separate.

It is relegation to a ghetto. The civil rights movement proved decisively that separate implies unequal, and that those who are made separate are ultimately injured. The lesson is as relevant to academic work as it is to any other social practice.

There is another clear lesson from the civil rights movement. Change comes through shared effort. It is forestalled when we squabble among ourselves. If we want to prevent future break-ups of our academic departments, we need to establish our significance. That requires us to fully embrace what we share, particularly the study of play.

### **The Potential for Collaboration: the Obesity Example**

It is fine to extol the advantages of finding common purpose among scholars who study sport and recreation, or to advocate play as a shared paradigm, but commendation and advocacy are insufficient to demonstrate any tangible advantage. Nevertheless, there *are* tangible advantages. Consider, for example, obesity prevention. Gusfield (1981) showed that social problems become “owned” by those whose paradigms are allowed to define the problems. In other words, we describe and then attack social problems using the dominant paradigms of the disciplines that are home to those who are put in charge. In the United States, obesity treatment and prevention are assigned to the allied medical professions that are organized federally through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and at state level through public health departments. The problem has been medicalized, and the medical professions enjoy high prestige. Sport management and recreation management are not among the allied medical professions (with the arguable exception of therapeutic recreation), so neither has played a role in setting the research or policy agendas. Nevertheless, millions of dollars in research funds are available through government (e.g., NIH) and private (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson) foundations for the purpose of addressing obesity—a feature that makes the topic attractive to scholars in both recreation and sport management.

Obesity does seem to have become a genuine national problem, although its causes and consequences may have been misrepresented or exaggerated by the medical community (Campos, 2004). Evidence shows that the rate of obesity in the United States is high and has risen dramatically over the past two decades (Flegal et al., 2010; Ogden et al., 2010); obesity is associated with an array of health problems (Kuo, Hadley, & DeFelice, 1983); and it is costly to the economy (Finkelstein, Fiebelkom, & Wang, 2003). The approach by the CDC and public health authorities has been to promote exercise (along with healthy eating). In fact, exercise has long been a key pillar of the national attack on obesity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Thus, we see substantial ongoing public investment in programs encouraging us to walk, bike, take the stairs, and join an exercise class. Nevertheless, the fact that the United States nonetheless continues to have high rates of sedentary living (Hall et al., 2007) and an escalating obesity epidemic is *prima facie* evidence that the promotion of exercise is ineffective.

Health professionals could address this failure by doing more to promote exercise. However, from the standpoints of marketing and consumer behavior, it makes little sense to do so. Exercise is unlikely ever to appeal to a mass market. First, it is often painful (Vecchiet et al., 1999). Indeed, a common exercise mantra is, “No pain, no gain.” Second, most people find exercise to be boring (Cohen-Mansfield, Marx, & Guralnik,

2003; Ebben & Brudzynski, 2008; Nahas, Goldfine, & Collins, 2003). This is even true for those who have been convinced to exercise. Visit your local health club and watch some of the classes. Some are popular because they do not hurt, but they can consequently be so low-impact that they do not have the desired physiological effect (Tanaka, 2009). More significantly, watch people as they exercise on their own. Most are listening to music, watching television, or reading. They are doing everything they can to distract themselves while they exercise. In other words, even the relatively few people who have been persuaded to exercise are demonstrating their distaste for the activity. No one would invest in any product or service that was known to be both tedious and painful. It would be destined to fail when brought to market. Yet that is precisely the choice our national institutions have made.

The choice to promote exercise is, of course, a natural medical choice. As a cure, it is like other medications and other medical procedures. The fact that it is unpleasant simply reinforces its medicinal nature. What has been discarded in all this seemingly wise thinking is an alternative paradigm: play. Play has the clear advantage in that it provides hedonic rewards which people rarely find in pure exercise. Unlike exercising, play becomes a self-reinforcing behavior.

Paradigms are not easily assailed (Kuhn, 1970). There are recreation and sport management researchers who study the promotion of physical activity, often for the purpose of reducing obesity. After all, physical activity occurs in many recreational activities and nearly all sports. However, both sets of researchers operate within the medically dominated paradigm. The goal is to foster physical activity in order to obtain a medical benefit; neither play nor playfulness is a major consideration.

Clearly, if we are going to build physical activity programs designed to provide and to capitalize upon hedonic (including social) rewards, then sport and recreation (rather than exercise) are key. Playful physical activity is unambiguously a shared point of relevance for sport and recreation practice, as well as for sport and recreation research. It is, therefore, one useful place to find common ground. However, as long as we treat the two—sport and recreation—as somehow separate, we cannot advocate effectively for this more sensible vision, and so we do not. Yet together we can, and we should—not just because it is in our interest as scholars, but because it is in the national interest.

### **Overcoming the Taxonomic Divide**

Our language has separate words for sport and recreation; our curricula for each are independent of one another; and our academic institutions normally place the two in separate departments. So, it would seem that the two are not synonymous. There is a taxonomic divide.

Yet, taxonomies are social inventions. Taxonomies are artificial distinctions that we make because we believe they are heuristically useful. We invent them. In fact, they can differ across languages and cultures (Blount, 2009) because their utility varies according to context. If we make our taxonomies masters over us, rather than making them serve us, then we drive our attention away from what really matters—how useful a taxonomic distinction is in the instance to which we apply it. There may be times when the distinction between sport and recreation has utility, but if the distinction is reified, then we create an artificial impediment to the objectives to which we otherwise aspire.

By way of example, consider the emergence of sport tourism as a specialist realm. Several countries have endeavored to formulate and implement a sport tourism policy or plan, but with only marginal success, despite evidence that effective sport tourism development would be lucrative. The marginal success has been a consequence of the training of sport and tourism professionals who have come to think of themselves as separate (Weed, 2003). Consequently, they do not discourse together effectively, and they often fail to value the effort.

This taxonomic separation is then amplified as the sport and recreation divide becomes part of the discourse. For example, Deery, Jago, and Fredline (2004) argue that sport tourism is only sport tourism if it encompasses social comparison in the context of a sport event. Other forms of physical activity during tourism are, accordingly, recreational, and outside the sport tourism frame. Their argument is consistent with the direction taken in Australia's effort to formulate a national sport tourism policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000).

This simple taxonomic contention (which is not limited to the Australian case) has significant and devastating policy ramifications. Consider that a key goal of sport events is not merely to attract visitors during the event, but to contribute to the branding of the destination (Chalip & Costa, 2005). Yet, surfers who come to Australia's Gold Coast to surf the same point breaks at Kirra Beach that the Billabong Pro (a sport event) makes famous would (using the logic proposed in the Australian policy) be merely participating in a recreational activity, not a sport. Their activities would not fall under the rubric of *sport* tourism, so marketing to them would involve a different department than would marketing the Billabong Pro. Funding for promoting the Gold Coast to "recreational" surfers would also not be included among sport tourism promotions. Similarly, the Gold Coast's popularity as one of the world's foremost (recreational) surfing destinations would not be integrated with promotions that could attract added events.

The evident problem with this approach is that events and destination features would not be built into a coordinated strategy for cross-leverage (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005). The point of a sport tourism strategy is to be able to promote tourism to a destination by a particular market segment—one that has an interest in sports with which the destination is associated. Treating a physical activity as a sport in one instance and as recreation in another becomes self-defeating. It causes the proposed policy to be antithetical to the very objectives that were the point of the policy exercise in the first place. It is the difference between thinking that is trapped by taxonomic distinctions versus strategic thinking about the uses of sport and recreation to optimize the attainment of strategic objectives. In other words, before we reify our taxonomies, we should ask ourselves what they really aid, and what might be aided if we were to treat a particular taxonomic difference less rigidly. Again, bridging the taxonomic divide between sport and recreation enables better policymaking. It also enables significant new research opportunities (Chalip, 2004, 2006; Sparvero & Chalip, 2007).

### **Learning to Work Together**

Nevertheless, as Dustin and Schwab (2008) show, the record-to-date is not encouraging. Sport management programs have not been good bedfellows for parks and recreation programs. A fundamental source of the problem has been the way that

“sport” is defined in many sport management programs. The emphasis in most programs is on sport-as-an-entertainment, with a primary focus on professional sport teams and intercollegiate athletics. Yet, this is only a very small part of the sport industry, as the economic data clearly show (Meek, 1997). The narrow focus in most academic departments on sport-as-an-entertainment is, in fact, inconsistent with the vision of the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM), which is the focal professional association for the field. On the opening page of its website, the organization proclaims, “NASSM is actively involved in supporting and assisting professionals working in the fields of sport, leisure and recreation” (NASSM, 2010a). The organization’s statement of purpose specifies that “members of this Society are concerned about the theoretical and applied aspects of management theory and practice specifically related to sport, exercise, dance, and play as these enterprises are pursued by all sectors of the population” (NASSM, 2010b). Clearly, an intellectual alliance that encompasses sport management and recreation management is within the vision of sport management as described by its first and largest professional association. The narrow purview of so many sport management programs and so many sport management scholars is not consistent with the field’s proclaimed vision for itself.

When this narrowness delimits the focus of sport management faculty, it closes noteworthy avenues for research and practice. Sport-as-an-entertainment can be used to promote sport-as-a-recreation, and sport-as-a-recreation can be used to promote sport-as-an-entertainment (Warner, Chalip, & Woolf, 2008). In other words, the two can be mutually supportive. Yet typically, they are not. The empirical evidence shows that sport participation and sport spectating are negligibly correlated (Burnett, Menon, & Smart, 1993; Irlinger, 1994), although consumers’ underlying interests in particular sports can be exploited to promote each if appropriate strategies are formulated and implemented (Green, 2001). By treating sport-as-an-entertainment and sport-as-a-recreation as separate realms, the strategic potentials for synergy are lost, and (fundable) research opportunities are squandered. In order to recover the potentials and capitalize on the opportunities, there needs to be a dialog between the faculty specializing in each. The aim should be to identify shared paradigms and to seek out shared questions. If there is to be synergy rather than separation, then a dialog must be created in departments, at conferences, and through journals.

Nevertheless, even if intentions are good, the separation will persist as long as curricula and faculty are allowed to remain in separate silos. In point of fact, there is an array of tools available to make the alliance work. It begins with curriculum.

Textbooks are written for particular majors in particular classes. The topics on which textbooks focus are chosen on the basis of what has been taught in the past to those majors in those classes. Faculty members commonly design their curriculum around those texts. Thus, as sport management classes have evolved to focus on sport-as-an-entertainment, so have the texts, and so have student expectations. In self-reinforcing style, since sport management texts present topics and examples that focus on sport-as-an-entertainment, sport management classes focus on sport-as-an-entertainment, and the field becomes delimited. Recreation and recreational sports are excluded from sport management curricula not because they are irrelevant, but because past

practice and popular texts have not considered their relevance. Similarly, the potentials for cross-leveraging sport-as-an-entertainment with sport-as-a-recreation are missing in recreation curricula because past practice and popular texts have not explored the relevancy of insights from sport management research and practice.

One clear lesson from the challenges that sport tourism has experienced is that professionals who are trained to think only within a particular taxonomic frame find it difficult to work with professionals who do not share that frame. If we continue to educate sport management students as if recreation does not matter, then we can expect that they will not notice its relevance—whether to professional practice, scholarly research, or curriculum design. Similarly, if the study of recreation ignores sport management, then we should expect that students would feel they must choose between recreation and sport. If they are never shown shared relevancies, then they will treat the two as separate choices.

Working together requires that we rethink curriculum design so that sport and recreation are better meshed. So doing may sometimes require that we eschew narrowly targeted textbooks and create collections of readings instead. In other instances, it may simply require inclusion of supplementary readings, teaching cases, or hybrid assignments. These are simple steps—steps that are well within the capabilities of effective instructors.

There are also multiple means to induce faculty to cross-dialog and to build more synergized curricula. Hiring decisions, merit evaluations, and promotion contingencies can be tied to precisely that goal. Contingencies shape behaviors, and consequently affect a program's culture. That is why the University of Texas sport management program will neither hire nor promote a faculty member whose research and teaching is delimited to only one form of sport (recreational or entertainment). In addition, the program supports two laboratories through which faculty and students explore sport as both a recreation and an entertainment: "The Sport Development Laboratory" and "The Sport and Life Quality Laboratory." The result is that "sport" is broadly defined throughout the program, and sport management is researched and taught with reference to recreation as well as to passive entertainment. The system is far from perfect, but it demonstrates that contingencies can be applied to mold the directions in which the intellectual culture flows.

### **The Effort is Worthwhile**

Our argument began with considerations of fundamental differences between sport and recreation, and then a consideration that we are not so dissimilar. With a look at our shared beliefs about play and our shared academic status, we suggested that the separation of sport and recreation harms the status of both. We then reasoned that by coming together, both realms of study can elevate their status, but only if they are willing to bridge the taxonomic divide in order to build shared paradigms and identify mutual foci of interest. Our examples illustrate that the effort would be worthwhile because it would enhance our contributions to policy, open new avenues for research, enhance opportunities for research funding, and improve academic offerings.

To be sure, the displacement of traditional recreation education by sport management is a matter about which we should be concerned. It is an outcome to avoid. If those who study and teach sport management are unable or unwilling to build a shared



vision with those who study and teach recreation, or if either group is unwilling to implement the research and curricula that a shared vision indicates, then keeping sport management programs out of recreation departments may be one means to protect both fields of study. It would also impoverish each discipline. The issue should not be where recreation or sport management reside in the academy. The more fundamental concerns are how we discourse with one another, how we consequently shape policy, and the vistas we thereby open for our students. If we place the focus there, we can transcend concerns about academic home departments, and get back to what really matters—the search for knowledge and the opportunity to awaken young minds to the knowledge we discover.

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