Repositioning undergraduate education in recreation and leisure studies

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Abstract:

This article applies the repositioning framework developed for recreation and leisure service providers (Crompton, 2000, 2009) to recreation and leisure studies as an academic field. To ensure the viability of recreation and leisure studies, internal stakeholders must raise the standing of the field among several key external stakeholder groups: prospective undergraduate students and their parents, university administration, professionals, and the general public. The repositioning framework functions by identifying socially and politically relevant issues, working to address those issues through the medium of recreation and leisure studies, and effectively communicating these potential contributions to a variety of audiences. This article outlines real, associative, and psychological repositioning strategies that academic departments may implement individually, and as a collective whole, to raise the standing of recreation and leisure studies as a field of study.

Article:

Introduction and Background

The academic field of recreation and leisure studies, broadly defined here as any combination of leisure, recreation, park, tourism, etc., faces an ongoing crisis as an undergraduate program of study (see Burdge, 1985; Henderson, 2010; Rose & Dustin, 2009; Rowe, 2002). A variety of factors within higher education, a recent worldwide recession, and the loss of full-time positions in local public park and recreation agencies (Pitas, Barrett, & Mowen, 2017) have combined to undermine the perceived relevance of the major to prospective undergraduate students, parents, park and recreation professionals, the public, and other key stakeholder groups. The lackluster reputation of recreation and leisure studies as an undergraduate major comes despite mounting evidence of the contributions recreation and leisure services can make to a diverse set of issues, including overall wellbeing (Pitas et al., 2017b), mental health (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993;

Henderson & Ainsworth, 2002; Penedo & Dahn, 2005), physical health (Burton & Turrell, 2000; Crespo, Keteyian, Heath, & Sempos, 1996; Penedo & Dahn, 2005), and the local economy (Driver, 1990; Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Nicholls & Crompton, 2005).

The struggles of recreation and leisure studies as an academic field mirror, and are inextricably tied to, those of the professional field of public recreation and leisure services. Because these agencies represent a key stakeholder group and a major source of post-graduation employment, academic departments have a vested interest in their continued success. Traditionally, local recreation and leisure service agencies are funded through the allocation of tax-based municipal funds. Under such a system, securing adequate and reliable funding has long been cited as a primary challenge facing public recreation and leisure service providers (Crompton, 1999). Unfortunately, the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the resultant period of recovery disproportionately impacted allocations to park and recreation agencies relative to other public services, reducing overall allocations and resulting in the loss of approximately 14,000 full-time positions in the post-recession period (Barrett, Pitas, & Mowen, 2017; Pitas et al., 2017a).

At the same time that public recreation and leisure service providers struggle to legitimize their existence, recreation and leisure studies departments must do the same for a variety of stakeholder groups, including prospective students, parents, university chancellors, college review boards, the general public, and park and recreation professionals. Although students may be drawn to the field by the intrinsically motivated nature of the subject matter, recreation and leisure studies must compete with majors touting higher starting salaries, competitive job placement, and the promise of financial stability. While leisure educators may believe in the importance of the core concepts and values of field, this conviction does not automatically translate to other key stakeholder groups (Henderson, 2010). With state spending on public higher education declining sharply in recent years, and tuition costs increasing substantially, the need to establish legitimacy is now more imperative than ever (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). A core goal of leisure educators interested in the continued viability of the field must be to raise its standing among various stakeholder groups. The repositioning strategies outlined by Crompton (2000, 2009) provide a potential means of doing so.

An agency or organization's position refers to the place it occupies in the minds of stakeholders relative to other agencies that compete for the same funding sources (Ries & Trout, 1981). Repositioning is a conscious and concerted set of actions designed to change an organization's position. Crompton (2009) argued that for public recreation and leisure service providers to secure adequate and ongoing support and funding, they need to reposition themselves within the consciousness of members of the public, and decision making officials. Simply advocating for recreation and leisure services based on their own merit is not an effective strategy, as it neglects the political reality of public services (Glyptis, 1989). By addressing politically and socially important issues within a community, recreation and leisure services can enhance their perceived value. Ries and Trout (1981) were the first to recognize the importance of positioning as it applies to organizational management. Ries and Trout argued that to succeed, organizations must recognize their position relative to their competitors, rather than conceiving of themselves as existing in a vacuum.

The same premise may be applied to recreation and leisure studies, which faces many of the same challenges that are constantly negotiated by individuals and organizations in the professional realm of recreation and leisure services. With fewer full-time jobs available in the post-recession period, graduates must compete with a growing field of candidates (including those with degrees from other fields such as business and organizational leadership) for an increasingly limited supply of open positions. Henderson (2010) provided additional insight into the current state of recreation and leisure studies, and the relevant perceptions of the academic field. She wrote that recreation and leisure studies is in a period of crisis as it seeks to cement a collective identity as a field and to identify meaningful connections between leisure and society. Unfortunately, according to Henderson, the idea of leisure does not resonate with everyone equally: Although many within the field of leisure may recognize the utility of leisure to society, the general public may not. Addressing this gap in knowledge and understanding is a primary goal of repositioning.

Just as public recreation and leisure services seek to apply a coordinated set of repositioning strategies, recreation and leisure studies departments may benefit from a similar approach. This would involve shifting the collective identity and perception of recreation and leisure studies by moving the field to specifically address important issues, and effectively communicating the positive impacts that recreation and leisure studies can have on those issues. Just as Crompton (2000) argued leisure service providers must reposition themselves as vital community assets, recreation and leisure studies departments must reposition themselves as an attractive undergraduate field of study and a viable route to a desirable career and personal life.

This article applies the repositioning strategies for recreation and leisure service providers laid out by Crompton (2000, 2009) to an undergraduate educational context. Crompton (2009) outlined four specific strategies for repositioning, which would ideally be implemented simultaneously. *Real repositioning* occurs when an agency makes actual changes to its operations in order to address a priority issue; *psychological repositioning* refers to altering stakeholder beliefs about what an agency currently does; *associative repositioning* refers to aligning and collaborating with other organizations that already occupy a desired position and acquiring some of their position through these partnerships; and *competitive repositioning* entails altering stakeholder beliefs about the operations of an agencies competitors. The authors believe that competitive repositioning is beyond the scope of the current article, which instead focuses on real, psychological, and associative strategies. The following sections describe the discrete steps of the repositioning process and provide example within the context of recreation and leisure studies.

The Repositioning Process

Effective repositioning begins with identifying the key stakeholder groups influencing the organization in question (Crompton, 2009). In the case of recreation and leisure studies as an undergraduate field, several stakeholder groups are of importance. Undergraduate students represent the most readily apparent stakeholder group in the repositioning process. To increase the relevance of recreation and leisure studies as an undergraduate program of study, there must be sufficient interest among prospective undergraduate students. Convincing undergraduate students of the value of recreation and leisure studies may also impact a second important

stakeholder group, parents or guardians. Especially in situations where parents have a direct financial interest in their children's undergraduate education, they must be considered a key stakeholder group. University administration, which is involved in critical decisions regarding the fate of a recreation and leisure studies department, is a third key stakeholder group at the university or college level.

Employers and decision makers within the professional realm of recreation management represent another key stakeholder group, as gatekeepers for many of the employment opportunities for degree holders in the field. For recreation and leisure studies to remain relevant, members of the profession must continue to be invested in graduates as potential employees, and "buy-into" the value of recreation and leisure studies as a degree program. With the loss of full-time positions in local public agencies (Pitas et al., 2017a), this task becomes more difficult, as competition for quality jobs potentially becomes more intense. The public must also be considered as a key stakeholder for a variety of reasons. For recreation and leisure service providers, community sentiment is related directly to the allocation of tax dollars (Palus, 2010). If voters do not perceive recreation and leisure as relevant and worthwhile public services, the already diminished public funding stream and the job opportunities it supports may be further undermined. Public attitudes towards recreation and leisure in general also indirectly impact the status of recreation and leisure studies as an undergraduate major. Interest in and respect for this field of study may stem from general attitudes towards the concepts of recreation and leisure, and their perceived social and cultural values.

The second and third steps in the repositioning process involve identifying issues of paramount social and political concern to stakeholders, and then effectively communicating how the organization in question can address those issues (Crompton, 2009). Because the list of relevant stakeholders for recreation and leisure studies is diverse, an equally varied body of significant issues can be identified. For potential students and their parents, for instance, the opportunity for gainful and fulfilling employment post-graduation may be a significant issue. For public recreation and leisure service providers, an important consideration may be the ability to hire entry-level employees with applicable skills and experience. For members of the public issues of community and individual health, greenspace conservation, and the availability of high quality recreational facilities and programming may be priorities.

After identifying issues of concern to relevant stakeholder groups, the final step involves highlighting and effectively communicating the contributions of recreation and leisure studies to these issues (Crompton, 2009). This can be done in a variety of ways, and the information and messaging strategy is necessarily tailored to the issue and stakeholder group in question. For example, academic departments may track employment figures among graduates and use that information to communicate employment prospects to potential students and their parents. The wider benefits of recreation and leisure are the subject of a significant, and growing, body of literature. Participation in recreational programming and visiting parks has been shown to provide a variety of individual and community benefits. Strategies for communicating those benefits are the focus of the following sections and represent a key part of successfully implementing the repositioning process.

Strategies for Communicating Benefits

As part of the repositioning strategies described previously, recreation and leisure studies departments must more effectively communicate their value. Highlighting the potential contributions of the field to a variety of important issues serves to raise awareness of the field and increase its perceived relevance with key audiences. The following sections outline potential approaches that may be used by the field of recreation and leisure studies to reposition itself as a vital course of undergraduate education. Specific repositioning strategies are operationalized using the framework discussed by Crompton in his 2000 and 2009 pieces, and reflect issues that are currently socially or politically relevant, or may be anticipated to become so.

Real Repositioning

Real repositioning involves actually changing what an agency does in order to meet issues identified by society as important. Real repositioning takes place on a continual basis within academic departments, and should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a set of actions with a distinct beginning and end. A primary goal of any academic department is to prepare students to successfully enter the professional world. A degree from an accredited academic institution is an invaluable tool in the search for quality employment. If the needs of students or the preferences of employers in the professional arena change over time, changes in the academic preparation of those students should in turn reflect those changes.

A recent study by D'Eloia and Fulthorp (2016) addresses the question of how practitioners believe university programs can better prepare students for this process. The main themes to emerge from their analysis were practical experience, interview skills, and job awareness (e.g., knowledge of the agency, community, and specific position they are hoping to occupy). Fulthorp and D'Eloia (2015) ranked specific competencies desired by decision makers, with categories such as ethics, professionalism, and communication topping the list. Ideally, research such as this is used as a guide in the ongoing real repositioning process: Changes are made in curriculum and in the overarching direction and philosophy of the program to better address the needs of students as they enter the workforce, helping them become well rounded individuals and professionals.

Departments may benefit from tailoring their degree programs to specifically address the preferences and concerns of hiring managers in order to provide the best opportunities to their graduates. A recent special issue of *Schole* identified several emerging needs on the part of recreation and leisure studies students (Powell, Johnson, Anderson, & Paisley, 2013). Among them are an ever-increasing understanding of the use of technology, community-based engaged scholarship, critical thinking ability, and experience with populations that differ from their own. As the world of recreation and leisure services continues to evolve, so must recreation and leisure studies departments that train each generation of professionals. These departments must continually identify emerging trends and politically important issues, and tailor their curriculum to meet the evolving skillset needed by graduating students. This must be balanced however by a refusal to chase each new fad, often disguised or touted as a promising new direction.

Although sub-disciplines have long been a part of many departments, adding or removing a specific concentration in response to changing demands from students or employers represents a

readily apparent example of real repositioning. A specific instance can be found in the case of many recreation and leisure studies departments adding sport management to their curriculum as a means of increasing their appeal to a broader group of potential students. Such an approach is not without potential pitfalls however. Dustin and Schwab (2008) argued that incorporating peripheral disciplines dilutes the core mission of recreation and leisure studies. The authors also contended that these programs may be transient in nature, simply searching for a permanent home and identity of their own, using recreation and leisure studies as a convenient stop along the way. Even accounting for potential downsides, incorporating peripheral disciplines may be an opportunity for recreation and leisure studies departments to drive undergraduate enrollment, increase relevance as an undergraduate program of study, and gain influence within their college and university.

For departments pursuing this strategy, maintaining a cohesive identity and a set of clearly defined values and objectives is necessary to avoid becoming overextended and fractured as an academic unit. Dustin and Schwab (2008) encouraged academic departments to identify their core values and be selective when adding new content and modifying existing offerings. A deliberate process of evaluation for potential changes to a department may be a necessary step for departments hoping to walk the narrow path between chasing fads and capitalizing on emerging trends. An example of success in this arena may be the aforementioned use of engaged scholarship, the practice of applying classroom knowledge to real world situations with the goal of enriching the student experience (Miami, n.d.). At a time when many disciplines seek to leverage these practices to increase the relevance and effectiveness of their teaching, recreation and leisure studies may be considered one of the early adopters. Identifying and seizing emerging trends in the future will be key to the continued success of recreation and leisure studies.

Associative Repositioning

Associative repositioning refers to aligning and collaborating with other organizations that already possess a desirable position and, in the process, gaining some of that favorable position (Crompton, 2009). By identifying potential partners already in a favorable position (at their own university, or in the local and national community), and forming meaningful working relationships, recreation and leisure studies departments may be able to enhance their own standing among key stakeholder groups. An example may be found in the broader world of community recreation. The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) actively works to position their efforts through the lens of prominent associations and strategic partnerships with nationally recognized and established corporations and non-profit organizations. The NRPA collaborates with, among others, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Disney, Major League Baseball, and the Food Research and Action Center (NRPA, n.d.). In the process of partnering with large, recognizable, and respected organizations, the NRPA enhances its own position in the minds of the key stakeholder groups it serves (i.e., practitioners and recreation and leisure service providers).

A similar strategy is being pursued by many within recreation and leisure studies, based on the assumption that certain academic fields hold a well-established and positive position in the minds of key stakeholder groups. Current efforts by many researchers focus on socially relevant

issues such as physical activity and obesity, conservation, community development, and social justice. In addition to positive image and prestige, such collaborative research efforts represent a promising new avenue to sustainable future funding. Whereas large grants or contracts supporting such research may be beyond the reach of recreation or leisure studies faculty, repositioning research as collaborative, trans-disciplinary efforts makes them more attractive to key stakeholders and funding gatekeepers.

At the level of undergraduate education, recreation and leisure studies could emerge as a more attractive major through partnerships with other departments that have high status on campus. Creating a curriculum that emphasizes socially and politically relevant issues within the context of recreation or leisure can help achieve this goal. For example, a business concentration within the department may draw in students who are attracted to recreation and leisure studies but wish to approach it from a different perspective (some departments such as Brigham Young University have gone so far as to relocate to a business school, although this represents an example of real repositioning). Collaborating with prevention sciences or public health is another natural fit for recreation and leisure studies departments, given the rising recognition of the role that parks and open spaces can play in ameliorating or preventing a variety of negative health outcomes, and promoting resilience within individuals, communities, and the environment (Dustin, Bricker, & Schwab, 2009). Collaborative concentrations and minors that reach across departmental or college boundaries also serve to raise the profile of recreation and leisure studies as an academic field in the minds of university decision makers, and can be a platform for requests for additional resources (human or capital) at the departmental level. Identifying and cultivating such relationships must be done with care, however, as the transfer of any negative position or image is also possible.

Psychological Repositioning

Psychological repositioning works to change stakeholders' beliefs about an organization's operation (Crompton, 2000, 2009). Unfortunately, such attitudes and beliefs are resistant to change, and as such this approach may be difficult and time consuming. Crompton (2009) outlined four specific sub-strategies: providing scientific evidence countering currently held beliefs, soliciting the input of credible experts, providing evidence of benefits in novel ways, and changing the language used to frame the issue. Steps 1, 2, and 3 in this process are linked to one another, and all four are rooted in the ideas of persuasive communication theory, which involves disseminating information in an effective fashion (see Ajzen, 1992; and Fishbein & Ajzen, 1981 for an overview).

As the scientific evidence supporting the contributions of leisure in a variety of contexts (e.g., health, economic development) continues to grow, effectively communicating these benefits is an ongoing and pressing concern for recreation and leisure studies departments. To this end, expert input involves the use of trusted sources to disseminate important information to key stakeholder groups. These trusted sources may also help to present important information regarding the importance of recreation and leisure studies in ways that have not previously been considered. To be most effective, this information should be presented in a fashion that resonates with personal experiences and common knowledge, such that the relevance of these connections becomes readily apparent (Dustin, Schwab, & Bricker, 2010). The Healthy Park Healthy People

US campaign spearheaded by the National Park Service is an example of this process (National Park Service, n.d.). Using trusted sources such as the National Park Service (the "expert"), park visitation is presented as a means of facilitating physical activity in an attempt to promote healthy lifestyle choices and outcomes (the "testimony" or "input"). The parks and protected places that benefit from increased visibility and public support are not new or different, but the messaging associated with them tells a novel story and highlights their contributions in an innovative fashion.

Finally, changing the language used to describe the field may be necessary to shift attitudes related to its value. A prime example of this is the change of title in many departments from "leisure studies" to some combination of recreation, sport, park, experience, tourism, etc. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo recently extended this trend, changing the name of their department from *Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration* to *Experience Industry Management* (Cal Poly, 2016). The name change at Cal Poly recognizes the ever increasing number of sub-fields included in many recreation and leisure studies departments, and the emphasis among consumers on experiences rather than commodities in the global economy (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998). Although the actual offerings at a curricular or content level may not be modified significantly with such a change, reframing the information may alter how key stakeholders such as parents and prospective students perceive it.

These name changes mirror and promote the expanding scope and mission of these academic departments, and the increasing diversity of interests and opportunities present in our field. Such an effort is an attempt to "reclaim" the terminology that describes the field of recreation and leisure studies. While "leisure" may be of considerable importance to members of our field, in many Western cultures the term comes with a variety of negative connotations. The work of Veblen in particular (1899) associates "leisure" with wasted time, idleness, and laziness. Regardless of the veracity of those connections, the term "leisure" may be a loaded one. Expanding the scope of departments to include socially relevant and desirable activities such as *sport* and *tourism* may serve to convince students and parents of the value of our departments. Although the name of a department may seem trivial to some, for potential students flipping (or digitally scrolling) through an academic bulletin, differentiating one major from another may depend on split-second decisions based on that name.

Conclusion

To ensure the continued vibrancy and viability of recreation and leisure studies, educators and academics must actively engage in the repositioning process. Although Crompton approached repositioning from the standpoint of recreation and leisure service providers, many of the same principles and ideas apply to recreation and leisure studies as an academic discipline. To paraphrase Crompton, if educators and administrators in our field focus their energies on doing a good job managing their courses and research projects on a day-to-day basis, that will define the scope of their relevancy and impact (2009, p. 109). It is not enough as a field to confine our efforts to the immediate concerns of individual departments or projects. Instead, we must work to underscore and enhance our relevance to a broader portion of society, focusing specifically on the key stakeholder groups identified throughout this article. Continuing to work and teach as we

always have will yield the same results that we have always gotten; in order for recreation and leisure studies to thrive, we must do more.

Crompton (2009) also argued that if recreation and leisure service providers continue to do what they have always done, they can expect to receive fewer resources in the future. Two recent analyses (Barrett et al., 2017; Pitas et al., 2017a) of funding for local public park and recreation services illustrate that following the Great Recession, tax funding for parks and recreation stagnated or declined despite an ongoing economic recovery. While other public services flourish, recreation departments have seen their operational and capital budgets slashed repeatedly. This article argues that the same fate may await recreation and leisure studies in the academic context. Other fields of study continue to offer more sophisticated and targeted appeals for the best undergraduate students, as well as the limited resources available to academic departments. In order to compete in this arena, recreation and leisure studies must move forward in a similar fashion, utilizing the repositioning strategies articulated in this article. Henderson (2010) wrote that change for recreation and leisure studies is an inevitable but not necessarily destructive process. Actions taken on the part of academic departments, and by the larger field of recreation and leisure studies, can help direct change in a positive fashion. The only course of action that is truly unacceptable is paralysis; a failure to act may be equated with an acceptance of diminished relevance within academia and broader society.

Repositioning recreation and leisure studies as an academic field has implications beyond campus and may be important for the professional field of recreation and leisure services, as well as the general public. For recreation and leisure service providers, the availability of quality employees with applicable skills and experiences is a primary concern. For students to receive a quality education that prepares them for entry into the workforce, recreation and leisure studies departments must meet changing demands from employers, an outcome that may be achieved through the repositioning strategies outlined herein. Further, for recreation and leisure studies departments to compete for quality students who will eventually become quality employees, departments must continually and successfully position themselves in the minds of potential students and parents. In turn, high quality graduates and employees may lead to more effective recreation and leisure services. Given the well-established contributions of those services to a variety of issues, this may eventually translate into greater benefits at the individual and community level.

Henderson (2010) used the story of Chicken Little as a means of illustrating the current state of recreation and leisure studies. Briefly, Chicken Little becomes panicked that the sky is falling because an acorn lands on her head. Chicken Little recruits several friends and rushes to tell the king the bad news. Henderson wrote that for decades, various voices within recreation and leisure studies have furthered the perception that we are a field in crisis, pointing to various perceived shortcomings and looming threats (e.g., Jackson & Burton, 1999). Although Henderson argued that the sky is not actively falling, she acknowledged various intellectual, institutional, and societal "acorns" exist and cannot be ignored. In the face of constant change and growing competition for increasingly scarce resources, ongoing repositioning represents a sensible course of action for recreation and leisure studies. The future fortunes of our departments, and more broadly our professional field, may rest to some degree on the success of these efforts.

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