

# Promise and Practice: The Dichotomous Nature of Partnership Between Parks and Recreation and Higher Education in Northeastern Ohio<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** A survey of 73 northeastern Ohio parks and recreation department directors confirmed what parks and recreation leaders have recognized as a national dilemma; despite strong support for the concept of partnership, 93% of local parks and recreation directors did not have current links with colleges and universities. Although respondents' positive reactions toward partnership were significantly related to the perceived likelihood of partnership creation ( $r = .5282, p = .01$ ), only slightly more than half believed that partnership formation was "likely" to "very likely." Funding availability, while a concern of many directors, did not positively or significantly correlate with either reaction ( $r = -.0156, p = .01$ ) or likelihood ( $r = -.0860, p = .01$ ). Further, given the low rate (7%) of extant partnerships, the proximity of parks and recreation departments to postsecondary institutions (mean = 4 institutions per department) did not promote partnership creation. The apparent disparity between partnership's perceived promise and actual practice suggests the influence of mediating factors inhibiting the potential collaborators' initiative to act. Systemic forces (such as institutional inertia), the lack of partnership-building information and models, and insufficient or unclear motivational factors may play pivotal roles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Having noted the emergence and proliferation of partnerships (and their demonstrable usefulness) in other disciplines, parks and recreation researchers and practitioners have lamented an apparent underutilization and lack of coherent application of partnerships within their field (Vaske and Donnelly 1994; Vaske, Donnelly, and LaPage 1995). To examine the reliability of this assertion, a survey of northeastern Ohio parks and recreation department directors was conducted in 1995 to assay the number and variety of parks and recreation-higher education partnerships. Contrary to the contention that "It has become incumbent on management to expand programs and increase personnel, while reducing administrative costs and eliminating duplication" (Vaske and Donnelly 1994, p. ix), which promotes utilizing the extra-departmental resources for which partnerships are well-suited, the survey data support LaPage's (1994) premise that, with very few exceptions, public sector partnerships of this type do not exist within the survey area.

Distilled to its essence, colleges and universities offer education and training in myriad disciplines, components of which are parks and recreation-related. In turn, parks and recreation departments provide potential employment for properly educated, "well-qualified" graduates. A principal characteristic of being qualified is possessing the invaluable knowledge obtained through practical experience, an educational adventure that, if properly addressed, could be easily supplied through partnerships between the two entities; the logical connection should scarcely merit mention. The question then becomes, if these partnerships hold such promise, why have they not proliferated in northeastern Ohio?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

For purposes of the survey, partnership was generally defined as an *ongoing arrangement between two or more parties, based upon satisfying specifically identified, mutual needs*. Partnerships have also been described as a spectrum of relationships including "relatively non-binding social contracts, economic contracts, and legal contracts" (LaPage 1994, p. 3). Within these contexts, a formal partnership displays the attributes of 1) longevity; 2) a written agreement that fosters stability; but also, perhaps, 3) some degree of inflexibility. A *non-formal* partnership differs from the first type only in that it may trade the "security" of a signed contract for the less constrained "handshake" agreement. The *informal* partnership (for example, many internship arrangements), while valuable in a variety of instances, often lacks permanence, continuity, and commitment.

Conducted principally by telephone during February, 1995, the survey (Table 1) was administered to the directors of 73 of the 80 known parks and recreation departments located within the 25-county Northeastern Ohio Region 2, as delineated by the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association (OPRA 1997). Almost every incorporated political unit funds a park and recreation department, the great majority of which employ at least a full time director. With regard to colleges and universities, Region 2 contains 28 four-year institutions of higher education and 19 two-year institutions of higher education. Seven counties had no postsecondary institutions within their boundaries, and one, Cuyahoga County, had 13.

Initially, a nine-question survey instrument was developed based on my observations as an independent contractor to two parks and recreation departments located within the study area. After querying the first 12 directors, the tenth question was added. The modified survey was then administered to the remaining sixty-one directors. In deference to the interviewees'

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TABLE 1

*The partnership survey questions, summary of department directors' responses, and Pearson's r test results for the Likert scale-type pairings.*

1. How many years have you been employed in your present position?	Average: 9.3 years	N = 70
2. How many colleges and universities do you consider to be "located" in your area?	Average: 4	N = 73
3. Does your department have an existing formal arrangement with any institution?	Yes = 5    No = 68	N = 73
4. Has your department had any previous formal arrangements with any institution?	Yes = 8    No = 65	N = 73
5. Does your department now have, or has it had, any informal arrangements?	Yes = 57    No = 16	N = 73
6. Has an institutional representative ever approached your department regarding partnerships?	Yes = 11    No = 61	N = 72
7. Has anyone from your department approached any institution?	Yes = 17    No = 56	N = 73
8. On a scale of 1 to 5, what is your personal reaction to the partnership concept (5 being favorable)?	Average: 4.2	N = 72
9. What is the likelihood that partnerships with higher education will be established (1 to 5)?	Average: 3.3	N = 72
10. How important is funding availability to partnership formation (1 to 5)?	Average: 3.6	N = 60
Correlation between <i>reaction</i> to partnerships and the <i>likelihood</i> of their creation:	$r = +.5282$ (significant)	
Correlation between <i>reaction</i> to partnerships and <i>funding availability</i> :	$r = -.0156$ (not significant)	
Correlation between <i>funding availability</i> and the <i>likelihood</i> of partnership creation:	$r = -.0860$ (not significant)	

time constraints, the instrument was designed to be administered within a two-to-three minute time frame.

The data generated by survey questions 3 through 7, requiring *yes* or *no* answers, have been examined proportionally. Questions 3, 4, and 5 had a subcomponent regarding partnership duration, for which individual mean scores were calculated. The data sets generated by the single-item, numerical rating scale questions eight, nine, and ten, have been examined both proportionally, and through use of the Pearson's *r* test for correlation. Additionally, the directors were given the opportunity to expand upon their prior responses in the form of unrestricted comments. These answers were used to illuminate the discussion, and did not merit statistical analysis.

## RESULTS

The directors' average length of service was 9.3 years. They perceived their departments to be located in proximity to, on average, four institutions of higher education. Every director listed at least one "local" institution, including those directors whose departments existed in a county that contained no postsecondary campuses.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents reported that formal arrangements did *not* currently exist between a given department and any of its corresponding colleges or universities. Further, 89% of the directors indicated that no such relationship had existed in the past. Of the five departments having active agreements, three involved sharing or managing facilities, one concerned the offering of classes, and one was related to administering a grant. The average duration of these few programs was 3.13 years. Previously expired arrangements included joint facility use (four), one class, and three long-term internship programs, which together had an average existence of 7.1 years. Only one department among the instances cited above reported *both* past and present activity.

Seventy-eight percent of the departments have sponsored less structured arrangements, most commonly in the form of internships of various types (41%), summer hiring (11%), or a combination of the two (15%). Of note in this regard is that 19% of the interns were not affiliated with "local" postsecondary institutions, and that some directors were constrained in their hiring practices by residency requirements. The remaining relationships were comprised of facility sharing (5%), consulting (4%), classes (1%), and "no informal programs" (23%). Departments had supported non-formal and informal programs for an average of 6.6 years.

Only 15% of the directors reported contacts initiated by a college or university representative. Three arrangements were spawned from these discussions, and the average length of those programs was 16.6 years. In comparison, 24% of the directors have contacted local higher education institutions, nine of whom indicated at least partial success and a program length of 8.3 years.

When asked to react to the *concept* of a partnership in negative or positive terms, 44% of the directors viewed partnerships as being "very positive" (4.5 or above on a scale of 1 to 5), and an additional 28% rated it "positively" (4.0). Only 3% felt negatively about the concept (below 3.0), with the remaining 25% being neutral (3.0 to 3.9), giving an average rating of 4.2. Opinions were less optimistic regarding the likelihood that partnerships would be established in the future, with 21% of the directors expressing a "very positive" outlook, 18% "positive," 40% "neutral," and 21% "negative" to "very negative." With regard to the importance of funding to the establishment of partnerships, 37% of the respondents believed funding was essential, 17% "very important," 26% "important," and the remaining 20% felt that funding was "not important" to "insignificant."

The directors were also given an opportunity to express their thoughts concerning partnership in general. The majority envisioned the beneficial attributes of

on-going relationships for both students and departments, and believed equal reciprocity should be expected. Most often cited were the influx of new ideas brought by students, and the corresponding "on-the-job, real world" training acquired in return. Several respondents expressed the strong opinion that partnerships should already be occurring, and that colleges and universities should be much more proactive in initiating these relationships. In contrast, lack of information, restrictive budgets, department size, overburdened staff, and pressures from community, users, and government were all mentioned as factors impinging upon the partnership process.

## DISCUSSION

The directors' overwhelming support for the partnership concept stands in sharp contrast to the actual efforts made toward collaboration. While a portion of this disparity may be attributed to the impression management aspect of social desirability response bias (Whitley 1996), the greater percentage is more likely the manifestation of the directors' collective uncertainty in the face of change. Despite their opinion that the onus for partnership formation should fall upon higher education, the reality is that, first, college and university bureaucracies, curricula, and course structure are firmly entrenched, making them susceptible to inertia and other hierarchical maladies (White and Wehlage 1995). Second, professors have traditionally viewed themselves as autonomous actors (Birnbaum 1988), wary of solutions arbitrarily prescribed by others. It is incumbent upon park and recreation directors, if they truly are interested, to initiate the process (Hultsman and Little 1995). Recent models by Decker and Mattfeld (1995); LaPage (1994); and Uhlik (1995), offer specific procedures and guidelines by which the professorate may be persuaded that it is *in its best interest* to form partnerships. Further, political and economic pressures being brought to bear upon public universities (Ewell 1994, Ohio Board of Regents 1994, Sclove 1995) may increase their level of receptivity.

As in the real estate business, location is often a pivotal asset, and the successful campaign by the Ohio Legislature to "place a college within a 30 minute commuting distance of every Ohioan" (Ohio Board of Regents 1992) should have also engendered interaction with neighboring parks and recreation agencies. Indeed, 52 directors listed at least three "local" campuses per department. Considering that nine of the 17 directors who did make an effort to contact their academic counterparts were rewarded, at least for a time (a 53% rate of success), the implication is that any parks and recreation department located near two or more campuses should be able to form at least one partnership of some type. Still, 93% of the directors had no extant partnerships with higher education in 1995, and this absence cannot be attributed to the respective institutions' proximity to one another.

The lack of a concerted effort to form partnerships or, for that matter, to even open a continuing dialogue, is more disturbing in light of evidence suggesting that purposeful contact noticeably increases the *duration* of

program length, once in place. In the previously cited instances wherein postsecondary-to-parks and recreation contact produced a formal partnership, the average life of those arrangements was *two and one-half times* the average of informal agreements in general. Although not quite as dramatic, the nine parks and recreation-initiated relationships had an average existence 25% longer than the overall average. The key word here is *purposeful*, and re-emphasizes the need to employ the practical methods by which proactive measures can be taken.

Some directors lacked an awareness of the very real potential represented by partnerships. To their credit, those administrators who were not familiar with its possibilities did not hesitate to request a more detailed explanation, but a palatable sense of ambiguity flavored nearly all of the responses. Finally, the directors' preoccupation with funding, although understandable, has become an unnecessary impediment to action. While acknowledging that conditions in the private sector often require more attention to the financial aspects of partnerships, the *academy's* normal goals and activities, with appropriate modifications, easily lend themselves to inexpensive collaborative alignments with park and recreation objectives (Uhlik 1995). To address this issue, orientation and education programs might encourage directors to explore partnerships more fully.

Whether the lack of partnerships within the survey area is peculiar to northeastern Ohio remains to be discovered. Of greater importance is recognizing that none of the factors investigated in the survey directly impede the creation of partnerships between parks and recreation departments, and higher education institutions. In their seminal review of organizational behavior, Hersey and Blanchard (1993) have noted, "People differ in not only their ability *to* do, but also in their *will* to do...(emphasis added)." A positive disposition toward partnerships is not enough.

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