

Agency Accreditation

PRT 595 – North Carolina State University

Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Sport Management Online Master's Degree

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Introduction

Early on in the distance education program I realized that one of the strengths of the program was how our assignments were connected to the work we were doing in our communities. In the spring of 2012 I began thinking about an independent study project that would tie together what I had learned over the course of the program and be of benefit to my department. I determined that to work towards agency accreditation would be that perfect project. While it is not feasible to finish the accreditation process in a semester it was feasible to: 1) understand the history of accreditation; 2) fully comprehend the standards; 3) determine who would be responsible internally for each standard; 4) build a realistic timeline to become accredited; and 5) understand the financial constraints in going through the process. As the semester winds down and the graduate program comes to a close I can't think of a better choice for an independent study.

History

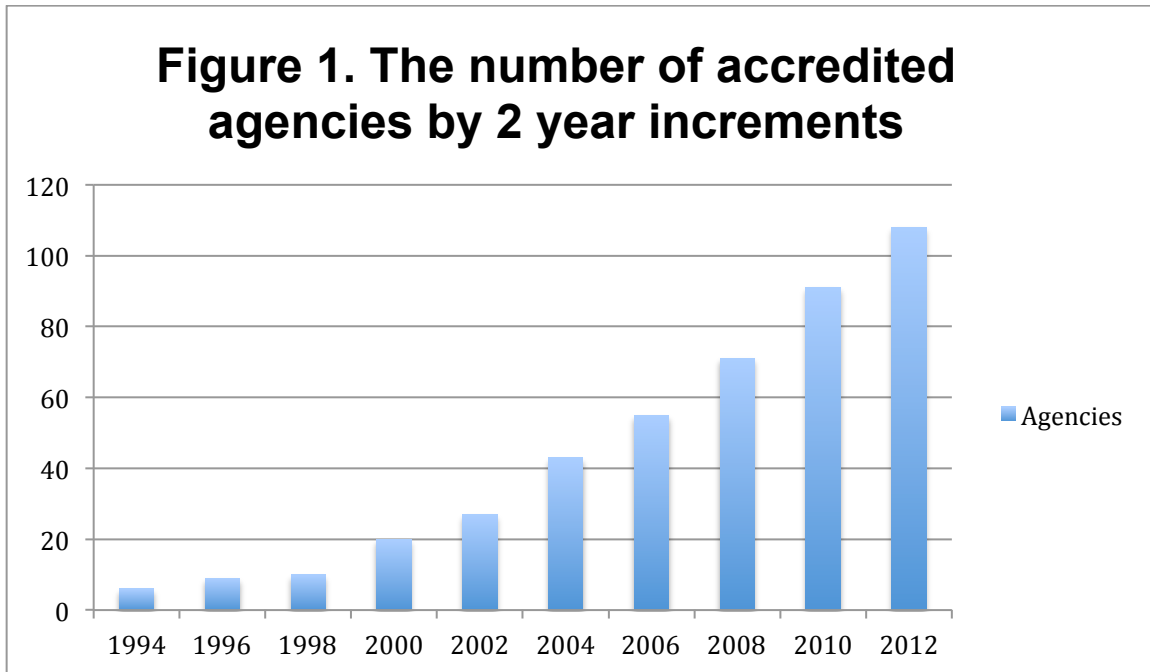
In 1987, an article was written by Louis Twardzik in *Park & Recreation* magazine strongly encouraging the formation of a set of standards for public park and recreation agencies similar to the current accreditation process for universities. He suggested that it be overseen by both the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) who was overseeing the university accreditation process but also the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administrators (AAPRA) (Twardzik, 1987).

By 1989 AAPRA had established a committee that was directed to develop standards for the accreditation process (Riley, et al. 2002). Don Cochran, past chair of CAPRA (Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies), notes that

Ford Hughes who was the director of a tiny town in St. James, Missouri is credited with initiative to get the 1989 meeting set up. Ford wanted to be able to compare his agency to other agencies to determine how he was doing (Beard & Hanna, 2011).

The committee came up with ten categories. The work was based on standards set in 1965 by the Great Lakes District as part of the then National Recreation Association (CAPRA, 2009). The standards at that time were called Evaluation and Self Study of Public Park and Recreation Agencies. In 1972 they were revised and updated and were formally replaced with CAPRA standards in 1992 (CAPRA, 2009). According to Vern Hartenburg in the December 2011 Park & Recreation magazine, it was the tireless efforts of Lou Twardzike and his colleague Betty van der Smissen that made the accreditation a strong and high quality program.

In 1993, CAPRA was formally established to oversee the accreditation process (CAPRA, 2009). The commission is under NRPA but: "... acts with independence and under its own authority in determining accreditation standards and conferring accreditation of applicant agencies" (CAPRA, 2009). The standards have been revised in 1996, 2001 and 2009 and are due to be updated again in 2014. As of 2012, there are 108 agencies accredited with the first agencies being accredited in 1994 (See Figure 1).



In 1999 the Management of Park and Recreation Agencies textbook was written to help agencies with the accreditation process. The second edition was updated in 2005 with a third edition in 2010. The original concept for a comprehensive book was conceived by the late Betty van der Smissen and the revenue from the sales of the book helps fund CAPRA (Beard and Hanna, 2011). The book explains the standards in detail to help communities in developing the materials they need to accomplish each one.

CAPRA

What Is Accreditation?

The following is from the CAPRA Handbook:

The CAPRA standards provide an authoritative assessment tool for park and recreation agencies. Through compliance with these national standards of excellence, CAPRA accreditation assures policy makers, department staff, the

general public and tax payers that an accredited park and recreation agency has been independently evaluated against established benchmarks as delivering a high level of quality. CAPRA accreditation is a quality assurance and quality improvement process demonstrating an agency's commitment to its employees, volunteers, patrons and community.

Accreditation is our chance as professionals to show to our community and our staff that we are running the department at a professional level. Many of the required standards are plans that you must have in place including a comprehensive plan, strategic plan, recreation plan, maintenance and operations management plan, general security plan, and risk management plan. The attached spreadsheet with timeline notes the 144 standards. Having the plans in place allows you to run a department that makes educated decisions based on research and thoughtful processes rather than the whim of the moment.

CAPRA accreditation involves three phases. The first is when the agency develops their assessment report, the second is the on-site visitation by CAPRA and then third and final phase is the Commission's review and decision. It is a 5-year cycle with every 5th year an agency needing to be re-accredited (CAPRA, 2009).

In the first phase the community submits a \$100 application fee and formally announces an intention to seek accreditation. It is at that point that the clock starts ticking and agencies have 24 months to complete the process. During the two-year period the agency completes a self-assessment using materials provided by CAPRA. Once the agency has determined that they have met all of the standards they submit their self-assessment along with a fee that ranges in price from \$165 - \$3,300 depending on the size

of the agency budget. Our community, which has a budget over \$1 million but under \$2 million, would have a self-assessment fee of \$550. Submitting your self-assessment is the completion of the first step in the process.

The second step is a visit from the visitation team to your community. The visitation team consists of three people. NRPA and CAPRA have trained all members of the visitation team in their roles. One member is the chair, another is a visitor who has been on at least one other visit and the other is someone who is new to the training process. The hosting community needs to cover all costs for the team including transportation, meals and lodging. Communities are encouraged to budget approximately \$4,000 for this expense. Some communities have been able to lower the cost by getting hotel rooms and meals donated. The visiting team will go through all of your files to make sure you are compliant for each standard. It is important to be very organized to ensure that this is a smooth process. Tad Nunez from Hartford, VT who has an accredited department and is involved with the visitation process noted that he has done a pre-visit to communities near to Vermont where he is not a member of the visitation team to run a mock visitation to help the communities get ready for the real visit.

The third step is when the visiting team reviews all information and makes a final determination. There are 36 required standards of the 144 that must be met plus the agencies need to meet at least 85% of the remaining 108 standards (92). Agencies are strongly encouraged to attempt to meet all standards and it is a mark of top excellence if you are able to meet 100% of the standards. Once your agency has been accredited you need to submit an annual report showing that you are continuing to meet all standards and

every 5 years go through all three steps in the process including submitting a new self-assessment report and host a visiting team.

There are trainings available to help communities succeed in the accreditation process. One is a workshop on the standards and the process. This is done in person at Congress and also through webinars. Another method to ensure success is to go through the visitation team training and become a visitor for departments that are going through accreditation. By visiting those communities and reviewing their standards it will help you in better understanding what is needed to meet the standards in your own community.

The belief from the pioneers of accreditation is that the accreditation of agencies would make the agencies more professional, efficient and effective (Riley, et al 2002). Ira Rubins (2007) states the following on professionalism:

Professionalism is seen as the process of institutionalizing and legitimating the occupation for both the park and recreation employees and the general public. The tenor of the research on professionalism, not only in parks and recreation but other endeavors, is that professionalism enhances the status of the field, and systematizes the activity targeted. That is, as a process, professionalization usually includes several milestones: first, the field is recognized sufficiently to have academic degree programs to credential participants; second, strong professional associations arise that take control of who can claim to be a participant; and final, accrediting bodies arrives for both individuals and organizations as a basis for claiming expertise.

Research

Ira Rubins in 2007 did his PhD dissertation on accreditation. “The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the relationship between national accreditation and accountability, professionalism and performance measures in public park and recreation agencies.” Ira came up with eight hypotheses to test:

- 1) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report higher adherence to standards in their departments than non-accredited agencies.
- 2) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report higher staff morale than non-accredited agencies.
- 3) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will have a higher proportion of recreation-degreed staff than non-accredited agencies.
- 4) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report a greater belief than non-accredited agencies that obtaining accreditation is an employee motivator.
- 5) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report a greater belief than non-accredited agencies that adhering to accreditation standards enhances public credibility and promotes organizational excellence and professionalism.
- 6) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report greater agreement with the idea that adherence to accreditation standards helps organizations achieve accountability and increases the success of organizations, as well as contributing to the legitimacy of parks and recreation as a recognized profession.
- 7) Non-accredited park and recreation agencies will report a greater belief that the accreditation process is too complex, too difficult, or too expensive. Accredited

agencies will indicate greater agreement with the idea that accreditation is not too difficult or too expensive.

8) CAPRA accredited park and recreation agencies will report a greater retention of revenue and greater numbers of new revenue sources than non-accredited agencies.

The final results were that eight of ten of the hypotheses were proven at a statistically significant level. The ones that did not show a significant difference were #3 related to recreation degreed staff and #8 related to increased revenue sources. The hypothesis that accredited departments would have a higher proportion of recreation degreed staff was not proven. There was no significant difference between the proportion of recreation degreed staff between accredited and non-accredited departments. There was also not a significant difference with greater retention of revenue or greater numbers of new revenue sources between accredited and non-accredited departments. Rubin's notes that the small sample size with revenue might be making the chi square test too insensitive to get a statistically significant level even though the percentage point differences between accredited and non-accredited agencies appear significant.

A greater percentage of accredited agencies (85.2%) did report maintaining revenue than non-accredited agencies (71.1%).... Regarding securing new revenue sources, 75.3% of all respondents reported that they did increase their revenue sources over the past three years. As with revenue maintenance, a greater percentage of accredited agencies than non-accredited agencies did report increasing revenue sources (79.6% vs 69.2%) (Rubins, 2007).

He recommends that future research include a larger sample size to get better data.

Jill Sandberg, researched perceptions of accreditation with accredited and non-accredited agencies. Her report was published in the August 2004 Park & Recreation magazine. Overall both accredited and non-accredited “felt that national accreditation would help their organization earn credibility, promote excellence, continually improve upon their efficiency, obtain a measure of excellence and establish the field of parks and recreation as a legitimate profession.” Where the differences were was in that non-accredited agencies directors thought that budgets, staff and time constraints were a hurdle and that accreditation would not motivate employees, improve current maintenance practices, improve level of customer service or influence the success of the organization. Accredited agencies did believe that being an accredited agency “... has helped to motivate their employees, assisted them in obtaining a measure of credibility, helped to promote excellence, improve efficiency, obtain a measure of excellence, improve customer service, improve programs and services and achieve a measure of organizational success.” Sandberg notes that “the challenge may not be in the need to change manpower or resources; the challenge may be in the need to change perception.”

Tad Nunez from Hartford, VT wrote an article for the New England Park Association (NEPA) newsletter titled “Accreditation... Is it Worth It?” Nunez reports the following benefits since their accreditation:

- We’ve had no reductions in our operating budget
- Our department staff has a real stake in decision making and the outcomes of our department
- Accreditation visitation reports have included recommendations that the Town Manager has agreed to

- We have increased our full-time staff from 6 to 7
- We have purchased Vermont Systems Rec Trac
- We have created solid policy and procedural manuals
- We have been able to secure new funding via grants, sponsorships and foundations
- We have decreased our liability insurance premium
- We have increased our capital equipment budget annually
- We have increased our capital project budget annually
- We have gained confidence with our policy makers and community members at large
- And most of all... our department operates in an efficient and effective manner and is accountable based on proven national standards

Greg Mack , past-chair of CAPRA and director of Ramsey County Parks & Recreation in Minnesota says “it is the process of accreditation from which most agencies benefit-through the involvement of public officials, citizens, and staff, and the development of strong master plans, policies and procedures, which strengthen and position agencies... Accreditation is completion of a journey. The seal is an acknowledgement that I have done the very best I can for my agency... and I’m positioned now to do what I need to do.” (Beard & Hanna, 2011).

Irby Brinson, retired director from Asheville, NC, says “It’s the most important thing our profession has ever done – it’s made us equals with other departments and says that this is a legitimate profession that takes its work seriously.” (Beard & Hanna, 2011)

Timeline

One of the main “take home” results I wanted from the independent study was a timeline of how to move our agency through the process. The first step in the process was to come up with a spreadsheet that would help in establishing a timeline. I put together a draft of one and then sent it out through the NRPA Accreditation network for feedback. This was a great choice as I received some excellent advice. I ended up with two workbooks with multiple worksheets within them. One workbook will monitor the process as we go through the accreditation process and the other is a working document that helped to set the final timeline. I have described them in more detail further in this paper.

The second step in the process was meeting with my supervisor to go over each standard one by one and determine where we were on a scale of: Met – we have met the standard; Partially met – we have done some work towards meeting the standard; and Not met – we have nothing in place. The process of going through the standards in this slow process helped us to better understand each one and it created buy in from my supervisor on the importance of meeting them. We determined that we met 11% of the standards; partially met 66% of the standards; did not meet 23% of the standards; met 7% of the required standards; partially met 70% of the required standards; and did not meet 16% of the required standards. Most of the standards that we noted as partially met were ones that we followed but had no written procedures. The attached workbook entitled “Accreditation grid Rutland” has a cover sheet noting the percent met of each category including the overall percent plus there are separate worksheets for each category noting the percent met including the notes that I took while meeting with my supervisor. This

workbook will be very useful as we go through the process to help us see progress. I will enlarge the cover page and post in a common employee space to allow everyone to keep track of the progress and celebrate as we reach milestones set by our team.

The third step was to reach out to others to have them prioritize the standards from their perspective. I received responses from one staff member (plus myself), an educator and three retired directors who had run accredited departments. Two of the three directors are still involved with CAPRA and assist communities with accreditation. I would say that this was the best decision I made beyond the initial decision of doing this class as a final elective. I received excellent advice complete with specific comments on each standard from two of the retired directors. This information served as the baseline for setting the timeline.

With the information gathered I worked on setting the timeline including who would be responsible internally for each standard. I took into account what standards made sense to work on at the same time, the work load during certain periods of time for staff that would be responsible for the standard, what standards had to be completed moving to the next standard and making sure the process was spread out over a reasonable period of time for success. The final process was to review the timeline with my supervisor to get approval for the steps needed and who would be responsible for each standard. Once we make a final determination that the timeline works from his perspective then the next step is to meet individually with each staff person involved to ensure buy in for the process and that they are willing and on board to accomplish what we set out for them. After making adjustments as needed from the meeting with staff we will want to post the timeline in a common area, similar to posting the percent

accomplished, so that it is clear who is responsible and the time frame in which they need to get their work done.

Workbooks

The attached workbook labeled “Final timeline” has four worksheets within it. The worksheet labeled “GANTT” shows the timeline using a GANTT chart. This helps in getting an overall view of the process to ensure that it is spread out over a reasonable period of time. The second worksheet labeled “Scores” shows the average scores of the three retired directors that were the baseline of the process. All three set the required standards as high on the priority list as they believed they should be the highest priority in that you must meet those standards. In addition, that worksheet notes the length of time suggested to complete the standard. To keep the process flexible I used blocks of time by season. This would give each person a three-month period to finish a standard. To determine the length of time to accomplish a standard I went off of notes written by the retired directors, where we were in the process of meeting the standard and my own general knowledge of each standard. The third worksheet labeled “Who” is the master timeline that shows the length of time needed for each standard plus who is responsible for each standard. The remaining worksheets are specific to each staff person. I have highlighted the standards that they are either directly responsible for or are part of a team to accomplish.. This makes it more manageable for staff in that they can easily see their responsibilities and get a sense of when will be their busiest time in getting them accomplished. When assigning “who” as noted earlier I made sure to take into account the busy times for the staff person to ensure success in completing the standard in a

timely manner. For example, the winter is the down time for our parks director so I tried to put as many standards as possible that were under his responsibility during that time of year.

As the timeline shows we are estimating that it will take three years to get our department accredited starting in the fall of 2013 and going through the spring of 2016. As we go through the process we will most likely make adjustments. It is important to remember that we have two years to complete the self-assessment so we would not want to submit a preliminary application until we knew we were well within a two-year window to finish the process.

Resources and barriers

Early on I sent an e-mail out to the NRPA Accreditation group and the NRPA Administrators group through NRPA Connect looking for feedback on the costs associated with a list of eleven standards that I thought would cost our department money to accomplish through hiring consultants. I received feedback that ranged from those who strongly believe you can do it all in house to consulting firms that noted a range of \$65 - \$90K that would be for a full comprehensive plan including a strategic action plan for a community with a population around 25,000. The full comprehensive plan would cover most of the standards that I had listed.

Those who responded firmly about the ability to do it in house noted that they didn't want accreditation to be seen as out of reach by many communities as they did not have the funds to accomplish it. They also noted that by going through the process internally you create more buy-in from staff. You "own" the results of the standards

rather than a consultant coming in and doing the work and the staff have no ownership of the follow through needed to accomplish the work set out by the consulting firm.

Beyond financial barriers is the need for the top administration to be on board. As Irby Brinson noted in an e-mail, “you need to get everyone up the food chain on board or the process will be more difficult.” In addition, any staff members who will need to have an active role in the process need to be on board. It is not possible to do this on your own without staff support. The process is the goal as compared to the “feather” in the cap of being accredited.

What I learned

Networking

The success of this project would not have happened without utilizing the various networks that I have built up through the Director’s School and being involved with conferences. In addition, I tapped into the NRPA Connect, which is a more formal way to share knowledge with professionals of like-minded interests. I specifically reached out to the Administrators Network. NRPA notes the Administrator’s “online network is intended to be a forum for discussion, sharing of knowledge, and posing of questions unique to the needs and interests of park and recreation agency/department administrators or those members aspiring to become an administrator.” I also reached out to the Accreditation Community through NRPA Connect which “is an online community intended to be a forum for discussion, sharing of information, and posing of questions unique to the needs and interests of CAPRA.” Listed below are people who responded to questions I posed whether in person, over the phone or through the Internet. In this day and age of instant communication we need to utilize the knowledge and strength of others

to maximize our potential and more importantly to “pay it forward” when others need support, too.

NRPA Staff

Stephanie Torres

Danielle Taylor

NCSU

Candace Vick - Independent Study advisor

Phil Rea (retired)

Karla Henderson

Professionals

Dennis Vestal, Greenville NC

Gail Elder White, Salisbury NC

Bill Foelsch, Morris Township NJ

Dirk Richwine, Henderson NV

Stacey Laird Dicke, New Braunfels TX

Tad Nunez, Hartford VT

Bob Bierscheid, St. Paul, MN

Lesley Stuler, Arlington VA

Dudley Raymond, Frisco TX

Betsy Orselet, VRPA VT

EJay Bishop, Rutland VT

Brooke Towslee, Rutland VT

Evie Kirkwood, Indiana

Kristy McClure, Chula Vista CA

Lamarco Morrison, Greenville NC

Companies

Teresa Penbrook, Greenplay LLC

Textbook

The textbook Management of Park and Recreation Agencies (2010) is a key book to have on your table. The late Betty van der Smissen originally conceived the idea for the book. “She wanted the standards for agency accreditation to be explained in detail so that the young professional could be successful in providing the highest quality service to their agencies.” (Moiseichik, 2010). This book touches on every standard with a compendium on CD that has samples of every document you would need to meet the standards plus additional ones to run a high quality department. As part of the course I have read through every chapter, taken notes and written a summary for the web site I created to share my process (<http://prt595.wordpress.com>). This has given me a more full understanding of what is involved with each standard and the depth of work that will need to be done to meet them.

Standards

I have learned that it is imperative to understand the standards inside and out before you start the accreditation process. The mission, goals and objectives for your organization must be done first as they tie into many of the other standards. The needs analysis, trends index and community assessment are all separate standards and yet are a part of the comprehensive plan, which is a separate standard. You can't just start from the top of the list and work your way down without having to re-do work or not getting the

full information you need to accomplish the standard appropriately. The feedback given by Irby Brinson on prioritizing standards was invaluable as he commented on what standards go together.

In House

As I noted in the budget section I went into this process thinking that the only way accreditation will happen is through hiring an expensive consultant. Nancy McShea from Sudbury MA noted in an e-mail that she is working her way through the accreditation process completely in-house. While some communities may have hired a consultant for the comprehensive plan they have done all the other work in-house. This will not be an easy process for our community to do this in-house nor will it necessarily give us the most “statistically valid” results in the end. The process of going through a needs index, community assessment, maintenance plan among many other standards internally will mean we will have buy in right from the beginning in not just meeting the standards but having the standards be what we do because it is what we believe in and what we accomplished.

Conclusion

The anecdotal and research information clearly shows that accreditation is worth the time and effort. It will take time and effort from agencies but in the end you have a more motivated staff with a higher morale (Rubins, 2007). As Greg Mack (Beard & Hanna, 2011) noted, the process of going through accreditation has tremendous value. You will connect your community, staff, and public officials as you prepare master plans,

policies and procedures. Dianne Hoover, past president of NRPA, sums it up well, “Accreditation is a gift you give your agency – a gift of well-run agencies, with tried and true standardized policies, and a gift to the community”(Beard & Hanna, 2011).

The final question is: What is Rutland going to do? After going through this process we are still on the fence. I have been given permission from my supervisor to focus efforts on the process starting in fall 2013 and see what happens. Our timeline for completion is over several years so we do have time to make a final decision. The pressure is on me to show within the course of the next year that agency accreditation is a worthwhile goal for our department. It is exciting to have the challenge laid out ahead of me knowing that end result will be a department that is run professionally and is focused on the needs of our community. It will require me to build my competencies around organization, tap into my competencies in motivating staff and being a role model through completion of my assigned tasks. The NCSU Master’s program has prepared me well for the challenge.

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