
Social Justice through Service-Learning in Parks & Recreation Management Education

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Introduction *The Need*

The creation and history of the United States (US) parks system are rooted in injustice. The oppression of indigenous peoples illustrates the early history of environmental (in)justice. The US government displaced Native peoples from the outdoor environment and the hunting and gathering practices that sustained them (Gruenwald, 2003), including for the acquisition of national park lands (Kantor, 2007). Every national park was once Native American land from which Native peoples were forcibly removed (Kantor, 2007). “Treaty rights to traditional use[s] such as hunting and fishing were erased, often without acknowledgment or compensation” (Kantor, 2007, p. 42).

US parks access was racially segregated until 1942 and visitation to all national monuments, battlefields, historic sites, memorials, recreation areas, parkways, lakeshores, seashores, rivers, and other park sites has been and remains overwhelmingly a practice of white people (Weber & Sultana, 2013). Researchers have posited affordability, cultural preference, discrimination, and location or accessibility as reasons for the continued low minority participation in national park recreation (Weber & Sultana, 2013).

Pitas et al. (2020) found Black respondents were approximately half as likely as white respondents to report a great deal of personal or household benefits from their local park and recreation services. Though Pitas et al. (2002) calls for further research to delve into why Black respondents perceive fewer benefits, Mowen et al. (2018) suggests that current local park and recreation offerings may not match non-white individual’s preferences. At both the national and local levels, “many communities of color are still deprived of quality parks and recreation opportunities, and the racial and ethnic disparities in provisions of public parks and recreation continue to be a serious social justice issue” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 102).

People with disabilities, especially those with ambulatory difficulty, have particularly limited access to recreation settings such as parks (Lee et al., 2020). In 2006, the National Park Service (NPS) acknowledged their failure to meet the minimum level of access for citizens with disabilities as required by federal law (Hansen et al., 2017). As of 2014, disparities remained. The NPS noted a lack of accessibility for visitors with disabilities in more than 400 national park units and recognized many recreational assets lacked inclusive opportunities that would broaden the spectrum of visitors able to enjoy these unique experiences (National Park Service [NPS], 2014). Most NPS units have not provided programs specifically for visitors with disabilities (Hansen et al., 2017).

Other marginalized groups also lack equitable access to parks and recreation amenities and programs. According to the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) (2018), which addresses parks and recreation across all levels, only 30 percent of park and recreation agencies deliver programs specifically to serve the LGBTQ+ population, despite a great need for quality park and recreation opportunities for these individuals. Recreation programs may make inclusion efforts, but they tend to be reactive in nature, addressing specific participant requests rather than serving the broader community (Anderson et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ participants are conscious of barriers to participation in recreational spaces, indicating that attempts at inclusive practices have often lacked communication between the serving organization’s staff and the LGBTQ community (Anderson et al., 2020).

Only 27 percent of agencies have programs targeted at refugee and immigrant communities (NRPA, 2018). Schultz et al. (2020) found that age, ethnicity, and race were the most frequently reported diversity and inclusion programs in the NPS at a rate of between 7 and 10 times more than religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status.

In addition to park visitors, parks and recreation employment also demonstrates inequities. White employees account for 79 percent of the NPS, and 62 percent of all employees are male. Black employees comprise almost 7 percent, Hispanic employees make up 5.6 percent of the Park Service general workforce, and Asian Americans encompass only about 2.3 percent of employees, all of whom are underrepresented as compared to percentages of these groups in the general population (Sonken, 2020). In cataloging the relevancy, diversity and inclusion programs of the NPS, Schultz et al. (2019) acknowledged the underrepresentation of diverse groups in the NPS workforce and noted the NPS Executive Order Director's Order 16B (NPS, 2012). This order articulated policies that prioritized achieving increased diversity and inclusion within its workforce (NPS, 2012).

Scholars have recommended that diversity and inclusion programs in parks and recreation need to continue cultivating an inclusive culture that will support successful recruitment of a diverse workforce and greater gender equality (Schultz et al., 2019). Across the profession, gaps remain in understanding how systemic racism, unfair power structures, and a lack of cultural competency and humility affect diversity, equity and inclusion, and access to quality park and recreation spaces and programs (NRPA, 2021).

At the national level, park and recreation services may have lost ground over time in addressing issues of social equity (Pitas et al., 2020). In a follow-up survey conducted in 2015 using the same items and methods as a 1992 study, Pitas et al. (2020) observed racial/ethnic discrepancies in terms of access to, use of, and perceived benefits from local park and recreation services that were not present in the original work. Local park and recreation services are also increasingly falling short of their goal to benefit all stakeholders equally (Pitas et al., 2020). To address the issue, the NRPA launched Parks for Inclusion in 2018 (NRPA, 2018). NRPA defines inclusion as “removing barriers, both physical and theoretical, so that all people have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of parks and recreation” (NRPA, 2018, p. 2). NRPA (2018) plans to improve access and programming for underrepresented groups.

Park and recreation leaders face significant challenges in their efforts to promote diversity and establish inclusionary and equitable practices at their agencies. These challenges include difficulty developing staff capacity and competency around diversity, equity and inclusion and attracting people who reflect the community to recreation careers

(NRPA, 2021). To meet these goals, the industry requires recreation and parks professionals at all levels who are informed and intentional about inclusion and social justice. That journey starts with parks and recreation management education.

The Method

Service-learning. Service-learning is considered a form of experiential learning (Lin et al., 2017). Students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service-learning gives students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community (White, 2018).

Within the recreation literature, Stevens (2008) suggests that “service-learning is a hands-on class project in which you learn by helping others, discover how class knowledge is useful in the real world, master practical skills ... and gain an appreciation for diversity” (p. *xii*). Service-learning opportunities can create a sense of urgency and provide a huge sense of accomplishment (Zimmerman et al., 2014). These experiences allow students to learn “hands-on” skills like problem-solving, conflict management, and time management, to which they may not be exposed in a traditional classroom setting. Zimmerman et al. (2014) found service-learning played a key role in the development and learning of the students in a recreation management program.

Social justice education. Social justice education encourages students to engage in critical reflection on dehumanizing sociopolitical conditions and actions they can take to alter those conditions (Adams et al., 2007). Social justice education takes an intentional approach to increase students' awareness about systems of power and empower them to work toward greater equity (Bell, 2016; Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019). Social justice education supports students in uncovering the history and present existence of privilege and oppression and in situating themselves within the larger social system (Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019).

Service-learning for social justice. Students gain awareness and understanding of complexities confronting the increase of diverse populations when educators use service-learning to teach social justice education (Culyer, 2018; Rice & Horn, 2014; Parkinson et al., 2009). “Many social justice education environ-

ments are experiential by design” (Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019, p. 326). Both traditional social justice education and service-learning provide students with opportunities to develop the skills necessary to lead in increasingly diverse and global communities (Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019; Engberg & Fox, 2011).

Though outdoor experiential education has grappled with social justice (Warren et. al, 2014; Warner, Meerts-Brandsma & Rose, 2020; Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019), there appears to be a gap in other segments of recreation education. Lee et al. (2016) recommend that understanding the value diverse groups place on nature and outdoor recreation should be a priority for both the practical and academic sides of the leisure field. Therefore, parks and recreation management education should explicitly teach social justice, which can be accomplished effectively through service-learning. This practice-based approach provides an example.

Practice Description

Course Description

This class was taught in a Sport Management program in a Business Administration department at a small, private college in the Southeast. This newly developed course was being taught for the first time. The course enrolled 25 third- and fourth-year students who were Sport Management and Hospitality and Tourism Management majors. All the students were white, 72% of the class was male, and 92% of the students were American.

The course explored the processes, procedures, resources, and issues surrounding the management of parks and addressed the major environmental, social, and political forces influencing recreation resource management. The class was taught as “Community-Integrative Education” (CIE). CIE, an institutional designation, requires courses to integrate a project that comprises at least 20% of the final grade and involves at least 10 hours of work. The project must apply academic knowledge to community issues, engage intellectually with the process of understanding a problem and generating a solution, evaluate outcomes and reflect on academic, professional, and civic learning (Flagler College, 2019). It must also demonstrate initiative in a collaboratively planned and reciprocally beneficial project that adds value to their community partner, and improve critical thinking, professional skills, understanding of diversity and concerns for community issues (Flagler College, 2019). The learning outcomes were determined by narrowing this institutional CIE description and

tailoring it to the content area. The course endeavored to: 1. apply parks and recreation management academic knowledge to community issues, 2. reflect on student learning and 3. explain diversity and social justice issues in parks and recreation management.

The course centered on a semester-long service-learning project in collaboration with the local public Parks and Recreation department. The instructor designed the project in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation department professional staff the summer preceding the fall academic semester. The purpose was to enhance the parks and recreation management curriculum by applying course work to community recreation needs and fostering a sustainable relationship with the local Parks and Recreation department.

The students’ service project entailed “adopting” a local park, including working on-site to improve it. The project included creating goals, developing a timeline, conducting research, executing their plan, and professionally presenting their results (see Appendix B). In three groups, the students 1. created a new recreational amenity site plan including access for persons with disabilities, 2. designed new educational signage, and 3. removed invasive flora species.

The students force ranked the options for their group’s focus – site plan, signage, or invasive species – in an interest survey administered through the class learning management system. The instructor divided students into groups where almost all students received their first-choice option. However, the instructor attempted to balance the capabilities of each group, ensuring each group comprised academically strong members and both male- and female- identifying students. The class sustained close contact with the Parks and Recreation department staff member, who approved their goals and timelines, supervised on-site work, answered questions, and assessed the quality of their final product.

The course contained specific units on social justice issues, including readings on the history of Native Americans and the parks systems, racial discrimination in parks and parks administration, and recreational access for persons with disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act. These modules included textbook chapters, academic journal articles, news articles, video, and webinar content (see Appendix A).

Outcomes

The course utilized end-of-term course evaluations as a measurement tool. The evaluations were ad-

ministered online using the survey platform Campus Labs and garnered an 80% response rate. Eighty-five percent of students completing the evaluation agreed that the course created opportunities for students to apply course content outside the classroom and involved students in hands-on projects, meeting the course learning outcome regarding application. However, only 50% thought the course introduced stimulating ideas about the subject.

To meet the learning outcome that required students to reflect on their learning, students wrote reflection papers at the end of the semester after completing the project. The instructor utilized descriptive coding to identify common themes. Descriptive coding assigns basic labels to data to provide an inventory of topics (Saldana, 2015).

In their personal reflections, students reported using communication skills and demonstrating leadership. Overall, students perceived self-efficacy was very high. All of the students argued that they were successful in meeting the project requirements and deserved high grades. The students' perception that they all excelled did not align with the peer evaluation data. Each student ranked their group members on scale of 1–5 on participation, task completion, quality and quantity of work, communication, and teamwork, and force ranked all the students in the group against each other. In each of the three groups, students agreed that one or two students significantly outperformed the others. Students accurately reported needing to improve on delegation and equitable distribution of work among group members and time management. The course evaluations demonstrated 75% of the respondents agreed that they were frequently encouraged to reflect on and evaluate what they had learned.

To determine if students could explain diversity and social justice issues in parks and recreation management, the course measured content knowledge with multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions on quizzes. The quizzes were administered online through the learning management system. Eighty-eight percent of students could correctly recognize the origin and consequences of racial segregation in the parks and define theories that explain the lack of non-white visitors to parks. Eighty-three percent of students could identify the legal obligation recreation managers have to persons with disabilities. Sixty-three percent could describe organizational efforts recreation agencies utilized to increase park

usage by marginalized populations. Sixty-seven percent could identify the greatest challenge preventing parks and recreation agencies from being inclusive to all members of a community, which is the difficulty of developing staff capacity and competency around diversity, equity, and inclusion (NRPA, 2021). However, on the course evaluations, only 60% of students reported feeling encouraged to share ideas/experiences with others whose backgrounds and viewpoints differed from their own.

The final projects were assessed on their execution – if the group met their goals on time – and the quality of their presentation explaining their process and product to the Parks and Recreation professional staff. Parks and Recreation professional staff and the instructor used the same grading rubric, initially completing it individually. Then, they met to compare rubrics and arrive at consensus.

The Parks and Recreation professional staff were satisfied with the final products, though expressed some skepticism about college students' procrastination and overall work ethic. Both instructor and staff noted obvious variation in the effort and contribution of individual group members. Staff and the course instructor held a debriefing session to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the class design and implementation and to suggest improvements.

While students displayed progress on learning outcomes and skill development, student course evaluations indicated students did not enjoy the course. In the course evaluations comments, some students expressed concern that their expectations of the course did not align with their previous experiences in the sport management program. One student noted, "I felt as if there was no connection to sports or recreation" and another said, "Not that relevant to the major, however was interesting."

In personal conversations with the instructor, students complained about the scope of group work, struggling with the interpersonal challenges of working in large teams. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the manual labor involved in park management and the physical demands of fieldwork, with at least two students registering their grievances with the upper administration of the College. In the course evaluation comments, one student remarked on "hours spent on gardening that taught us nothing." Arguably, student satisfaction is a lesser concern than the efficacy of the pedagogy.

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However, with this feedback, the course could be revised to mitigate student satisfaction concerns.

Implications

With revision, this model can be replicated to successfully teach social justice. College students in parks & recreation management programs can adopt a park as a service-learning project. This project meets Stevens' (2008) goals of helping others, applying class knowledge in the real world, mastering practical skills, gaining an appreciation for diversity, and additionally can address issues of equity and inclusivity. This project fills a gap in a pre-professional discipline that needs more emphasis on social justice.

As Breunig (2013) recommended, educational approaches should extend beyond increasing students' knowledge about themselves to focus on promoting pro-social and pro-environmental behavior change. To ensure that students are making connections with the work they are doing and issues of equity, the course should include a reflective piece specific to social justice. Students should write reflection papers that ask them to explain how their changes to the park are impacting marginalized communities and to identify personal behavior changes they can enact to promote social and environmental change. The project guidelines should also require students to create, measure, and evaluate a goal specific to inclusivity in parks.

The class should also add content units specific to environmental justice, inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities in recreation, and Universal Design, a process that includes consideration of environments, facilities, equipment, programs, processes, lessons, and other resources, with the goal of inclusion for all people to the greatest extent possible (National disability authority, n.d.). Educators should work closely with both organizations and students to provide meaningful projects that will enhance the service-learning experience (Culyer, 2018). The pre-planning and coordination with Parks & Recreation staff take time and commitment from both the organization and the instructor to design projects of appropriate scope.

To improve student satisfaction, the instructor should articulate clear expectations before students enroll in the class. The instructor should explicitly cover the nature of fieldwork, the purpose of the course, the justification for and the expected benefits of service-learning and disseminate the information through multiple channels. To facilitate student understanding of how this class serves their interests, students should write reflection papers

connecting the skills they use in this project and what they learned about social justice to their major and to their intended profession. Instructors should also consider limiting the size of the class, creating smaller projects groups. Having fewer students in each group may mitigate some of the variability in individual student contribution as they would be less able to "hide" under the work of the stronger students in the group. This may also lessen some of the strong students' frustration with group dynamics.

Limitations & Next Steps

This practice-based approach had limitations, particularly due to the time and place in which it was situated. The course was not solely dedicated to learning outcomes explicitly tied to social justice. That lack of focus may have lessened the course's efficacy.

The course ran Fall semester 2020 during the COVID 19 pandemic. Though the course was offered in a face-to-face modality, following the institution's distancing and masking guidelines, student attitudes may have been impacted. Students may have not been as open to hands-on fieldwork when other outside-of -class opportunities were limited and many of their other classes were online. Several students in the class were required to quarantine due to exposure to COVID 19 during the semester, which may have made group work more difficult. Future attempts at producing a similar course would not likely have those same challenges.

The course's origin in a small, Southeastern, private college's Business Administration department mattered. The demographics of the student population in the class were very homogeneous, which limits students' abilities to learn from people different from themselves. This supports Barnhill et al. (2018) finding that sport management students are not as diverse as the general undergraduate population. This lack of diverse identities and perspectives may make it more difficult to interest students in experiential learning focused on social justice. Ruparelia (2014) noted a "stunning" level of resistance in a class devoted to social justice issues and that meaningfully grappling with racism in class leaves many white students feeling anxious, confused, ashamed, angry, or guilty (p. 830).

Though this practice-based approach was a single, initial endeavor, with revision a similar course can successfully use experiential learning to teach social justice in parks and recreation management. Next steps for faculty interested in replicating this course include contacting their local Parks and Recreation profession-

al staff to initiate discussion and foster a relationship. The community partner's collaboration is essential to ensure that the project is mutually beneficial. Faculty should also read the suggested resources to continue to educate themselves on the need for social justice education in this pre-professional discipline. Faculty should design additional learning outcomes specific to social justice. Faculty should also investigate their institution's support for service-learning. Since service-learning is a high-impact learning practice (White, 2018), institutions may have additional resources to assist faculty in course development or criteria the course must meet in order to receive the designation.

Significant work must be done in the provision of recreation and park services to all members of the community, including those who have been traditionally marginalized or underserved (Pitas et al., 2020). Those who care about parks and recreation should strive for equitable distribution of facilities, services, and benefits (Pitas et al., 2020). Parks and recreation management educators must be at the forefront of producing industry professionals committed to that work. ■

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Appendix A: Suggested Resources

- C2P2Grants (Director). (2013, April 03). *Outdoor and recreational accessibility webinar* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kl8OopC-3ZAE&t=1712s>
- Cheddar (Director). (2020, May 26). *How America's national parks became critically crowded with tourists* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-wAQkYJ4Fk&feature=youtu.be>
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Appendix B: Assignment Guidelines

Parks and Recreation Management Service-learning Project

This course centers on a service-learning project in collaboration with XXXXXX County Parks and Recreation that combines learning outside of the classroom with giving back to the community. Students will enhance the parks and recreation management curriculum by applying course work to community recreation needs, fostering a sustainable relationship with the Parks and Recreation department.

Public Recreation Service Project Learning

175 points total. Students will participate in service-learning with the class, in collaboration with XXXXXX County Parks and Recreation. In groups, students will identify, research, propose and execute solutions to community recreation issues at XXXX Beach park. **Students will need to be prepared to cover for students in their group who fall ill or have to quarantine/isolate due to exposure to COVID-19.**

Students will meet with primary contact XXXXXX, Parks Naturalist, for an introduction to the site. Students will tour the site. Students will be divided into groups to address: park signage, recreation usage & design, and invasive species. Details on the group expectations can be found below. Class time on most Fridays will be dedicated to group work on the service-learning project, meetings with XXXXXX, and field workdays.

Components:

Research Paper. 25 points.

Students will compile current ACADEMIC research on their issue and write a paper summarizing the literature and analyzing how to apply that research to their project.

Content:

- Literature review: reporting on current academic, peer-reviewed research on the group's topic
- Application: discussion of how the group can apply that research to their project

Format:

- Correct APA citation format, including title page, running headers, page numbers, headers, and references page
- Times new roman font, 11- or 12-point, 1 inch margins
- Correct grammar and spelling, including using active voice, third person, and academic tone
- Less than one direct quotation a page, no direct quotations over 2 lines
- Green Turnitin score

Grading:

- Students will be graded on the thoroughness and depth of their research, appropriateness of their sources, level and clarity of analysis, and writing style.
- Grading rubric will be posted in Canvas under files

Timeline. 15 points.

Content:

- Students will establish a timeline for their work, which will be approved by the instructor and Parks Naturalist.
- Students must determine project goals, tactics to reach those goals, deadlines and accountability for how the group duties will be divided between group members.
- Students will present the timeline and allocation of duties orally to instructor and Parks Naturalist. That presentation must meet professional standards. See departmental rubric for presentations which can be found in Canvas under files.

Format:

- Template of Gantt chart in Google sheets: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1itY4ghb-muyxZ30YSHo2pi156sw_LP9-UWrg08Q4DRfE/edit#gid=1709744959

Grading:

- Students will be graded on quality, relevance, and format of goals and timeline and on the quality of presentation skills.

Execution: 50 points.

Students successfully execute their plans, meet deadlines, and meet their final project goals. (This part of the project may change for the invasive species group if the College moves to online only classes, since we will not be able to work on-site.)

Grading:

- Students will be graded on the quality of their final product in consultation with the community partner.

Group presentation: 50 points.

In groups, students will orally present their final projects to employees of XXXXXX County Parks and Recreation during the final exam period. This is most likely going to be conducted virtually. Content of the presentation will vary by group, see details below.

Content:

- Students will display and explain the final outcome of their group project work.

Format:

- That presentation must meet professional standards, even if conducted on Zoom. See departmental rubric for presentations which can be found in Canvas under files.

Grading:

- Students will be graded on the quality of the content included in their presentation and on their presentation skills in consultation with the community partner staff.

Individual contribution and reflection. 25 points.

Students will write individual reflection papers about the experience, including justifying their contribution to the group effort.

Content:

- Explain your individual contribution to the group project. You may use this list as a guideline, but not all of the questions are required, nor is this list exhaustive: What was your contribution to the group? What specific work did you complete for the group? What were the best aspects of your performance? What were the worst? What did you learn from working in this group? How can you improve my performance next time? What did you do that helped the group most? What did you do that helped the group the least? What can you do to make your level of contribution more appropriate? What grade do you think you deserve? Why?

Format:

- Times new roman font, 11- or 12-point, 1 inch margins
- Correct grammar and spelling, including using active voice and academic tone

Grading:

- Students will be graded on amount and quality of contribution to achievement of group goals, insightfulness of reflection, and writing style. Grading rubric will be posted in Canvas under files.

Peer evaluation. 15 points.

Students will complete peer evaluations for each member of their group.

Format:

- Students will fill out excel sheet on group members. Posted in Canvas under files.

Grading:

- Students will be graded on the average of the feedback they received from their peers.

Group details:

Each group will have slightly different content requirements and expected outcomes depending on their focus.

Invasive species group (needs approximately 10 students):

- Research paper topic – invasive species in Florida coastal parks, conservation management of coastal parks, use of native species in coastal parks
- Project execution – actual removal of invasive species; create long term plan for continuing invasive species management at park – including species recommendations, timeline of removal days and public outreach for volunteers
- Presentation – before/after pictures of park; explain long term plan

Site Design and recreational use (needs approximately 9 students):

- Research paper topic – recreational design of coastal parks, identification of amenities/park design other beach properties have, focus on Americans with Disabilities Act and accessibility

- Project execution - data collection on site capacity, what current visitors are utilizing the site for and when the parking lot reaches capacity, bathroom usage, design and execute survey regarding public interest in future park amenities, status of existing amenities, and overall community thoughts regarding the site, recommendation/proposal for site design
- Presentation - exhibit data collection results, propose site design plan

Signage (needs approximately 6 students):

- Research paper topic – use of signage in parks, types of park signage, interactive displays/play-scapes (with a focus on ADA options) environmental education signage in coastal parks, identify signage similar parks are using,
- Project execution – assessment of park signage at other similar parks, design and creation of park signage and interactive display options
- Presentation – exhibit assessment of signage, present new signs/interactive displays