

Implications of the Great Recession for Higher Education in Leisure Studies

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Abstract:

Although students in the broad field of leisure studies may pursue a variety of opportunities post-graduation, employment within local parks and recreation represents one potential career path. Unfortunately, the Great Recession disproportionately impacted local parks and recreation relative to competing public services. As such, this article examines the implications of the Great Recession for higher education in leisure studies. To do so, we first present data from the pre- and post-recession periods that illustrate (a) a shift toward a part-time labor force in local park and recreation service delivery; (b) the failure of local parks and recreation to keep pace with other local services in terms of part-time wages; and (c) a rise in private sector employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation. We conclude by contextualizing the current analysis in terms of previous discussions of the state and future of leisure studies.

Keywords: Great recession | higher education | local parks and recreation

Article:

Introduction and background

The Great Recession, which officially lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, was at the time the most significant economic slump in the United States since the Great Depression of the early 20th century. American gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 4.1%, a loss of more than \$550 billion; more than seven million jobs were lost, equivalent to more than 5% of total pre-recession jobs in the United States; and unemployment rose to near record levels for the post-World War II era (Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, 2019; Fogg & Harrington, 2011a). Although GDP and employment largely recovered in the years following 2009, worker earnings remained sluggish, and the impacts of the recession continued to linger more than a decade after its official end (Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, 2019). Furthermore, this recovery proved fragile and short-lived, as gains in employment and GDP were swiftly erased by the economic recession and

wider crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020).

The higher education sector was not immune to the effects of the Great Recession. While demand falls for most goods during periods of economic contraction, the demand for higher education usually experiences a spike, as the opportunity cost of higher education is reduced with fewer and less attractive job opportunities available (Barr & Turner, 2013). This trend was borne out during the Great Recession, wherein enrollment in postsecondary educational institutions in the United States rose from 18.2 million in fall 2007, to 21 million in fall 2010 (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Simultaneously, funding for both public and private colleges and universities was substantially diminished by the recession, resulting in an increasing cost burden on individuals, manifested chiefly through higher tuition and fees (Barr & Turner, 2013).

Balancing the costs imposed on individuals, a college education provides a certain degree of protection from the effects of an economic recession. However, a degree in leisure studies (defined in this manuscript to include any combination of recreation, parks, leisure studies, etc.) was of less use in this regard than others both during and after the Great Recession. Exploring the value of a college degree during the recession, Fogg and Harrington (2011a) examined rates of mal-employment and earnings differences among recent college graduates in various fields. They found that mal-employment (defined as a situation wherein “the education of the worker exceeds the education and skill required to perform the job,” p. 55) was most common among those holding a bachelor’s degree in the social sciences (32.4%), including leisure studies. This was above the average rate across degree types (27.2%), well above better performing degree categories such as math/computer science (17.8%) and health (15.9%), and second only to the humanities/liberal-arts (33.7%). At the same time, mal-employed social science graduates made less (\$38,089) than mal-employed graduates in business (\$43,633), math/computer science (\$44,391), and engineering (\$50,791).

It would also seem that these trends held true in the post-recession period. In the most recent data released through the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), recent graduates (ages 22–27) with a bachelor’s degree or higher in “leisure and hospitality” fared poorly in several key indicators (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). Of the 73 majors examined in the ACS, recent graduates in leisure and hospitality were third from the bottom in terms of underemployment rate at 63%, ahead of only performing arts (65.7%) and criminal justice (73.2%). In terms of early career earnings, leisure and hospitality graduates were 64 of 73, with a median early career wage of \$34,200. Although leisure and hospitality climbed to 55 of 73 in terms of mid-career wages (ages 35–45) at \$58,000 this may be of little immediate utility to graduates who entered the labor market during or soon after the Great Recession.

Although graduates of higher degree programs in leisure studies may pursue a variety of opportunities, a job with a local park and recreation agency represents one potential post-graduation trajectory. These public service agencies, with their focus on enhancing the quality of life for individuals and communities, were at the heart of the early growth of leisure studies as an academic field (Dunn, 2000). Indeed, many early faculty members were drawn from the practitioner ranks, as there were not enough qualified academically trained faculty to meet the rapid growth in such positions during the 1960s and 1970s (Dunn, 2000; Parr & Schmalz, 2019). Although tensions have long existed regarding the “fit” of parks and recreation in a higher degree program in leisure studies (e.g. Burdige, 1985; Godbey, 1985), there can be no denying the centrality of parks and recreation to the history of leisure studies as an academic field.

Purpose

Past research has documented the impact of the Great Recession on these local services, for which spending fell both in absolute dollar terms (Pitas, Barrett, & Mowen et al., 2017), and relative to other public services competing for the same limited funding (Barrett et al., 2017). As a historic branch of leisure studies, and a potential source of employment for graduates, this impact may be expected to trickle down to the individual programs that prepare these early-career employees. In this manuscript, we examine the potential implications of the Great Recession on higher education in the field of leisure studies in the United States, specifically focusing on its impact on local park and recreation services. To do so, we first present data from the pre- and post-recession period that illustrate (a) a shift toward a part-time labor force in local park and recreation service delivery; (b) the failure of local parks and recreation to keep pace with other local services in terms of part-time wages; and (c) a rise in private sector employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation.

Method

All figures reported in this manuscript were drawn from publicly available databases provided by the United States Census Bureau. Public-sector employment and salary/wage figures were drawn from the most recent version of the Annual Survey of Public Employment and Payroll (SPEP; United States Census Bureau, 2019b). During years ending with a “2” and “7,” the Census Bureau conducts a full census of all local governments throughout the United States; a representative sample is used to compile data during other years. As such, we report aggregate data for the 50 states from the years 2001–2002, 2006–2007, 2011–2012, and 2016–2017; these were chosen to represent a full census of local governments, and capture the pre- and post-recession periods. To make comparison between years more intuitive, unless otherwise noted, dollar amounts have been converted to 2017 values to account for inflation using a calculator provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Because the SPEP represents a one-month snapshot (March) of employment and payroll in local governments, yearly salary was estimated by multiplying reported values by 12. For more detail regarding public-sector data sources and analysis procedures, see Barrett et al. (2017), Pitas et al. (2017), and Pitas et al. (2018).

Private-sector employment information was drawn from the County Business Patterns (CBP) program, which provides annual subnational economic data, categorized according to industry type (United States Census Bureau, 2019c). Information on employment was collected for industries in the “arts, entertainment, and recreation” (AER) using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code 71. All industries represented by six-digit codes within AER were included, and reported during the same years as public-sector employment data.

Results

In the following sections, we report data and analysis corresponding to the three points mentioned previously: (a) a shift toward a part-time labor force in local park and recreation service delivery; (b) the failure of local parks and recreation to keep pace with other local services in terms of part-time wages; and (c) a rise in private sector employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation.

A shifting labor market in local park and recreation service delivery

In their 2003 analysis, Crompton and Kaczynski reported steady, gradual, gains in full-time employment in local parks and recreation from 1983 to 2000. That pattern continued until the onset of the Great Recession, which resulted in the loss of more than 18,000 full-time jobs from 2008–2009 to 2011–2012 (Pitas et al., 2017). Although full-time jobs have since begun to recover, with positive growth in every year since 2012–2013, they have yet to reach pre-recession levels. Conversely, despite reporting contractions in certain individual years, part-time labor experienced significant growth in the post-recession period, with the addition of over 20,000 part-time positions reported from 2006–2007 to 2016–2017 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Full and part-time workforce, local government park and recreation services across 50 US states.

	Full-time employees	Part-time employees	% part-time	Standard deviation	Minimum % part-time	Maximum % part-time
2001-2002	158,987	175,631	52.49%	12.75	29.51%	78.25%
2006-2007	164,588	201,525	55.04%	12.59	22.68%	78.89%
2011-2012	145,926	201,499	57.99%	11.78	32.27%	78.88%
2016-2017	157,065	221,944	58.56%	11.35	35.28%	81.27%
Change	-1.922	46,313	6.07%	-1.40	5.77%	3.02%
% change	-1.21%	26.37%				

As a result, part-time positions have come to represent an increasing share of the workforce that delivers local park and recreation services. From 2001–2002 to 2016–2017, part-time positions grew from 52.49% to 58.56% of the total labor force in local park and recreation services. The largest single gain took place between 2006–2007 and 2011–2012, with a nearly 3% increase in the proportion of total jobs accounted for by part-time employees. Simultaneously, the amount of variation in the proportion of part-time positions between the 50 states has fallen steadily from 2001–2002 to 2016–2017, demonstrated through declining standard deviation in the proportion of jobs accounted for by part-time employees. This trend may indicate there is convergence around an increased reliance on part-time employees (see Table 1).

Salary and wages in local parks and recreation

Concomitant with a shift toward an increasing reliance on part-time labor in local park and recreation service delivery, wages paid to part-time employees of local park and recreation agencies have failed to keep pace with wages paid in other local services. In 2001–2002, the average hourly wage paid to a part-time park and recreation employee was 73.4% of the average hourly wage paid to all other part-time local government employees. That figure fell to 69.6% in 2011–2012, before rebounding slightly to 70.6% in 2016–2017. Once again, the single largest negative change was seen between 2006–2007 and 2011–2012. Although wages increased in terms of real dollars paid per hour, when adjusted for inflation, part-time employees of local governments experienced a decrease in their hourly wage from 2006–2007 to 2016–2017. This trend was not confined to park and recreation employees, but was instead observed across part-time positions at the local government level. Although not reported in detail here, a similar trend was noted among park and recreation employees at the state government level, who saw their

inflation-adjusted hourly wages fall by approximately 17% in the post-recession period (2008–2009 to 2014–2015), and by nearly 16% from 2000–2001 to 2014–2015 (Pitas et al., 2018).

No similar pattern was evident in terms of full-time salary. In real dollars, and when adjusted for inflation, full-time employees in local parks and recreation and other public services experienced an increase in salary over time. Notably, the rate of increase in full-time salary was highly consistent between parks and recreation and other local government services; the salary paid to a full-time employee of a local park and recreation agency stayed relatively steady at around 81% of the salary paid to all other full-time local government employees (See Table 2). Despite growth in full-time salary for local park and recreation employees, it may be worth noting that in inflation-adjusted dollars, the salary of a park and recreation employee in 2016–2017 was approximately 90% of the salary other local government employees made on average in 2001–2002.

Private-sector employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's County Business Patterns program, private-sector employment in the U.S. economy increased from approximately 112.4 million jobs in 2002 to approximately 128.6 million jobs in 2017, an increase of 14.4%. During the same period, jobs in AER increased from approximately 1.8 million to approximately 2.4 million, an increase of 31.2%.

While job creation in the AER sector outpaced the overall economy during this period, there was considerable variation across the specific industries within AER. Some industries such as casinos (except casino hotels) and bowling centers experienced significant contraction in their workforce over this period, while employment at historical sites and in dance companies was relatively flat between 2002 and 2017. Conversely, several industries experienced dramatic growth in employment during this period. Notably, growth in AER was led by industries that may be viewed as complementary to, or in competition with, local parks and recreation. For example, industries such as fitness and recreational sports centers, which added more than 300,000 jobs (72.2% growth), sports teams and clubs (36,262 jobs, 94.5% growth), and nature parks and other similar institutions (1,402 jobs, 20% growth) all outperformed the economy as a whole. See Table 3.

Discussion

As noted by Parr and Schmalz (2019), discussions regarding the state and future direction of leisure studies (as a field and an academic degree program) are not a novel occurrence. Whereas Henderson (2010) used the tale of *Chicken Little* as an analogy to frame their discussion of the topic, Parr and Schmalz (2019) used the framework of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) to conceptualize the growing pains they perceived in the field. In our discussion, we agree with Parr and Schmalz (2019) that while this is not a new issue, it is indeed an important one. However, while they take a broad-based approach in their discussion, touching on the status and role of various elements such as leisure philosophy, theory, and individual worldview, we take a more focused approach. In particular, we confine our discussion to the implications of the Great Recession for higher degree programs in leisure studies, specifically through the lens of its impacts on local park and recreation services.

The success of an academic department is linked inextricably to that of its graduates. Postgraduate career satisfaction is one way to measure success, and is a predictor of several key measures for academic departments, including overall student satisfaction, the degree to which a

program fulfilled student expectations, the perceived value of a degree, and the likelihood of students to recommend the degree to others (Clemes et al., 2008; Letcher & Neves, 2010). Although there are other measures of student success, such as length of time to degree attainment, subsequent enrollment in graduate education, retention through the sophomore year, and grade point average (Kuh et al., 2006; Venezia et al., 2005), career prospects post-graduation are particularly relevant to this discussion of the Great Recession.

Table 2. Salary and wage information^a for local park and recreation employees and all other local government employees.

	Full-time salary ^b		Part-time hourly wage			
	Parks and recreation	All others	Parks and recreation	All others	Parks and recreation salary as a proportion of average salary	Parks and recreation wage as a proportion of average wage
2001-2002	\$47,744.36	\$58,766.17	\$13.44	\$18.31	81.2%	73.4%
2006-2007	\$49,039.70	\$60,303.50	\$13.64	\$19.00	81.3%	71.8%
2011-2012	\$50,156.64	\$61,336.92	\$12.82	\$18.42	81.8%	69.6%
2016-2017	\$52,659.54	\$65,019.29	\$12.72	\$18.01	81.0%	70.6%

^aAll dollar values adjusted to 2017 dollars to account for inflation.

^b12 month salary estimated based off of a one month (March) snapshot.

With this in mind, the results we present above may be relevant to practitioners and proponents of leisure studies. As a result of the wide-ranging changes wrought by the Great Recession, recent graduates of leisure studies degree programs interested in local parks and recreation face an uncertain career situation. Now more than ever, they are likely to begin their careers as parttime employees, and to make less than their peers in local government. While full-time salary has kept pace with other local government positions, part-time wages paid to park and recreation employees have lagged over time. In addition, local park and recreation agencies have also been subject to declining public investment, as relative allocations of tax dollars to parks and recreation have not kept pace with other local public services (Barrett et al., 2017). This decline in public investment, in both the physical and human capital necessary to deliver local park and recreation services, suggests that in addition to short-term issues, longer-term problems may begin to compound in the years to come.

This discrepancy in wage growth between part-time and full-time park and recreation employees further exacerbates the issues created by a shift toward a part-time workforce; as full-time jobs become scarcer and more desirable, there will be increasing competition for those positions that favor more experienced employees over recent graduates. This phenomenon is not confined to parks and recreation, as the Great Recession disproportionately impacted teenagers and other early career professionals across job sectors. With the increasing demand for employment relative to the supply of high quality jobs, employers were more likely to hire over-qualified, experienced workers for positions that were traditionally filled by young people (Fogg & Harrington, 2011b). This disruption in the normal cycle of entrance to the work force threatens not only to undermine the career success of graduates, but also to discourage potential students seeking stable, rewarding employment.

Concomitantly, the data illustrate robust growth in complementary or competitive private-sector industries. Across the period of analysis, the number of positions (full- and part-time combined) in local parks and recreation grew by 13.27%, well behind private “sports teams

and clubs” (94.5%), “zoos and botanical gardens” (75.5%), “fitness and recreational sports centers” (72.2%), and “nature parks and other similar institutions” (20%). Despite the growth in job opportunities in these private-sector industries, it is unclear how well such positions substitute for employment with local park and recreation agencies. First, while there may be significant overlap in the job duties performed, the missions of public and private institutions are inherently different. It may be that the profit-motive that drives the private-sector is less appealing, or an active deterrent, to students who entered leisure studies with the goal of working for a public institution. Further, leisure studies graduates that wish to enter these private-sector industries may find themselves competing directly with students from other degree programs such as sports management, kinesiology, or physical education. With this in mind, a pragmatic recommendation may be for students in traditional leisure studies programs to further develop their resume and skill set with course work or a formal certificate/minor/second major in a complementary program. It must also be noted that in many cases, such programs are housed within or alongside leisure studies, a situation described and debated by Dustin and Schwab (2008).

The unfavorable career prospects for those entering the local park and recreation job market may also be related to several trends in higher education in leisure studies that have been noted in previous research. Talmage et al. (2017) reported that the number of post-secondary degrees awarded in parks and recreation between 2006 and 2013 remained stagnant, while related fields such as city/urban planning, public administration, and social work grew during the recessionary period. This relative lack of growth during this time period came despite the previously reported growth in overall enrollment in higher education during the Great Recession. Just as local park and recreation agencies have been unsuccessful in securing greater proportional allocations from local government during times of economic growth, degree programs in parks and recreation failed to grow during this period of increasing enrollment. At a time when financial and career stability were likely of heightened concern to prospective students, parks and recreation was unable to present its case as a viable career pathway.

Although there was little change in the number of degrees awarded in parks and recreation, this stagnation was offset by growth in tourism related degrees (Talmage et al., 2017). While there was only 7.84% growth in “parks, recreation, and fitness” between 2006 and 2013, tourism degrees at the undergraduate and graduate level grew by 55.40% during the same time period. This expansion in tourism was driven specifically by growth at the undergraduate level. Put into the context of overall higher education enrollment, which grew 18% across the period of analysis, the 7.84% growth in parks and recreation actually indicates significant decline for degree granting programs in parks and recreation (Talmage et al., 2017). In contrast to the anemic performance of the park and recreation degree track within leisure studies, tourism, with its focus on commercial recreation and for-profit operations, clearly resonated with prospective students. Future analysis will be needed to fully quantify the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism as both an industry and a degree track.

Table 3. Private employment in arts, entertainment, and recreation (six-digit industries within NAICS code 71)

Industry	Jobs in 2002	Jobs in 2007	Jobs in 2012	Jobs in 2017	Change	% change
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Fitness and recreational sports centers	422,294	514,537	581,417	727,173	304,879	72.2%
Promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events with facilities	51,137	85,779	112,270	150,208	99,071	193.7%
Amusement and theme parks	94,107	101,247	125,897	164,381	70,274	74.7%
All other amusement and recreation industries	95,246	15,462	100,784	152,291	57,045	59.9%
Sports teams and clubs	38,371	52,780	59,993	74,633	36,262	94.5%
Amusement arcades	22,437	27,122	38,744	48,779	26,342	117.4%
Museums	77,952	83,655	86,641	97,351	19,399	24.9%
Zoos and botanical gardens	22,257	28,478	32,953	39,062	16,805	75.5%
Golf courses and country clubs	290,041	316,442	307,360	302,327	12,286	4.2%
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	39,236	45,772	42,284	50,228	10,992	28.0%
Promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events with facilities	28,869	26,575	27,425	33,997	5,128	17.8%
Agents and managers for artists, athletes, entertainers, and other public figures	17,052	17,420	17,548	21,578	4,526	26.5%
Marinas	23,047	28,788	25,764	26,825	3,778	16.4%
Skiing facilities	68,872	75,655	74,246	71,147	2,275	3.3%
Theater companies and dinner theaters	66,925	69,678	65,728	68,385	1,460	2.2%
Nature parks and other similar institutions	7,021	6,561	6,745	8,423	1,402	20%
Other performing arts companies	6,677	11,952	6,010	7,421	744	11.1%
Historical sites	8,893	9,845	11,066	9,540	647	7.3%

Dance companies	9,970	9,500	8,709	10,128	158	1.6%
Other spectator sports	18,251	22,091	15,777	15,877	-2,374	-13%
Other gambling industries	57,992	68,384	51,548	52,223	-5,769	-9.9%
Racetracks	44,882	51,221	47,541	36,757	-8,125	-18.1%
Musical groups and artists	48,959	43,304	36,618	39,099	-9,860	-20.1%
Bowling centers	81,617	80,453	69,936	71,685	-9,932	-12.2%
Casinos (except casino hotels)	163,956	136,923	104,286	89,410	-74,546	-45.5%
<i>Industry total</i>	<i>1,806,061</i>	<i>1,929,624</i>	<i>2,057,290</i>	<i>2,368,928</i>	<i>562,867</i>	<i>31.17%</i>

The rise of tourism related degrees during the recessionary period is a recent example of the splintering or fragmentation taking place in leisure studies departments that many have previously reported, most often in a negative fashion (e.g., Dustin & Schwab, 2008; Henderson, 2010; Parr & Schmalz, 2019; Spracklen, 2014). Whether or not the rising profile of tourism has negative or positive impacts on leisure studies broadly may depend on institution-specific circumstances. For instance, although tourism is often housed in a broader leisure studies department, it may also fall under other disciplinary umbrellas such as business, hospitality, or management. Depending on its institutional home, this spike in interest in tourism as a bachelor's degree program may attract students to leisure studies who might otherwise avoid the major (or not know about it), or it may pull potential leisure studies students away to a tourism program housed across campus.

Regardless of whether or not the growth in tourism as an undergraduate degree program translates into increased interest and enrollment in leisure studies broadly, such fragmentation has other, less-quantifiable, impacts. As described by Parr and Schmalz (2019), leisure studies was initially formed as a distinct field by academics from various arenas such as sociology and geography who came together based on a shared interest in leisure. The fragmentation evident today is the continuation of that process, as sub-disciplines within leisure studies fledge, and search for their own identity. It is that dissolution of common identity that Dustin and Schwab (2008) and Henderson (2010) identified as a particularly troubling outcome of fragmentation and specialization within leisure studies. The relatively poor career prospects in local parks and recreation as a result of the Great Recession may serve to accelerate this process by (a) helping drive interest/ enrollment in related disciplines that offer the (potentially illusory) promise of employment such as tourism or sports studies, and/or by (b) causing potential students to pass over the major altogether in favor of what they perceive as a more stable, lucrative choice.

Several limitations to this study must be acknowledged. The data we utilized, while providing valuable insight regarding long-term trends, are of limited granularity; it is not possible to make inferences about individual municipalities with national-level data, and the conclusions reached in this manuscript must be interpreted with this in mind. Further related to data, this manuscript is limited in scope to a very specific area within leisure studies. Only a proportion of students intend to enter local parks and recreation, and it is likely that the changes discussed here will impact other students and concentration areas differently. Regarding private-sector data, the CPB does not disaggregate employment figures into full- and part-time; as such, it is not possible to know if a similar shift toward part-time employees is occurring in the private-

sector using this data. Moving forward, researchers may wish to address these limitations by collecting primary data specific to their analyses.

Future directions and conclusions

As noted earlier, examinations of the current state and future directions of leisure studies are not a new idea, and Henderson (2010) described a long standing tradition of questioning whether or not the sky is currently falling. Whether or not the impacts of the Great Recession on local park and recreation services represent a long-term structural threat, or are simply another “acorn” (false alarm) is not yet known. Henderson also noted that acorns are actually normal, and that addressing them allows for the field to evolve and move forward. To do so, Henderson identified four specific approaches, which the author noted were not new ideas in themselves: embracing change, articulating a collective identity, celebrating the contributions of leisure, and identifying collaborators. Just as crisis is cyclical, we believe that the approaches offered by Henderson a decade ago serve as a worthwhile starting point for approaching the issues we have raised herein.

Embracing change

In order to maintain relevance and vibrancy, leisure studies must become what Henderson (2010) described as homeostatic: flexible enough to adjust in a self-reflective fashion to the critical issues of the day. A lack of flexibility and an aversion to change may be far more detrimental to the field than any external issue. Crompton (2009) repurposed the repositioning framework originally developed by Trout and Ries (1986) to offer similar direction: leisure studies must identify socially important issues and provide solutions to address them. In the context of our discussion of the Great Recession’s impacts, that flexibility may be manifested in a variety of ways. For example, it may be necessary to reexamine the professional skills and competencies that are taught in post-secondary leisure studies programs to ensure that students are prepared for entry into the job market in local parks and recreation (D’Eloia & Fulthorp, 2016). Especially as the workforce transitions to an increasing reliance on part-time positions, recent graduates will likely be called upon to fill a greater variety of job responsibilities. Programs must also remain flexible in regards to their curriculum at large, and continually re-assess whether the required courses and experiences meaningfully add to the value provided by a degree in leisure studies. Although we have focused thus far on marketable skills that enhance job prospects for graduates, we also argue that a firm grasp of the theoretical basics of leisure studies will be important moving forward. While the techniques, technology, and practices of the day may evolve, students with a solid footing in the theoretical basis of a quality leisure experience will be favorably positioned for a variety of career paths, in an ever changing professional arena. A focus on “experience design,” which seeks to create and facilitate quality experiences in all contexts (Duerden et al., 2015), is already a feature of multiple degree granting programs in leisure studies. Although this may be viewed by some as a further splintering of the field, it may also be an example of homeostasis and the repositioning framework in action. By focusing on experiences in contexts beyond leisure, these programs position their students to compete in the wider “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), and give them valuable flexibility at a time when traditional leisure or recreation service jobs are increasingly scarce.

Articulating a collective identity

Although change is constant, and must be embraced, it cannot be at the expense of a cohesive identity across the various elements of leisure studies. Earlier in the evolution of the field, Pronovost and D'Amours (1990) argued that we must be more than management concepts applied to leisure service delivery. At that point, the field was still coalescing from the various disciplinary homes of its practitioners. The current identity challenge is similar to that described by Henderson (2010) and Parr and Schmalz (2019), wherein continued fragmentation and specialization threaten to chip away at the basic values and assumptions that tie the field together. At the same time that change and new opportunities need to be embraced, Henderson (2010, p. 398) noted, it is necessary to continue to reflect on and “articulate what makes leisure studies different from other fields, [or] perhaps we should not exist.” Articulating a strong collective identity may help remediate the negative effects of fragmentation and specialization, helping maintain ties between the emerging and increasingly self-sufficient sub-disciplines that exist in leisure studies.

The emergence of a standalone research and teaching conference by The Academy of Leisure Sciences (TALS), and a conscious effort by many academics in leisure studies to differentiate themselves from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) may be manifestations of this phenomenon. Despite a long history between the two organizations, going back to the earliest days of leisure studies as an academic discipline, members of TALS elected to disassociate from NRPA despite concerns about “losing contact with practitioners” (TALS, 2015). In the end, the ability to operate autonomously, broaden the topical scope of the TALS conference compared to the NRPA Leisure Research Symposium, and establish an independent identity was deemed more important than continuity with NRPA. The recent reconstitution of the NRPA Research Sessions, formerly the NRPA Leisure Research Symposium, marks an interesting development in this regard. Whether this represents further fragmentation within the field, or simply an expansion in opportunity for park and recreation-focused scholars to present their work, may depend in equal parts on individual perspective, and the actions of individuals, groups, and organizations in the years to come.

Celebrating leisure's contributions

To remain relevant, leisure studies must make significant contributions to individuals and the communities they are a part of, as well as the broader social sciences (Henderson, 2010). Although local park and recreation services provide a myriad of benefits to users and non-users alike, they are often viewed as discretionary services, and are among the first to be cut during times of economic contraction (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Pitas et al., 2017). Despite the diminishing investment of public tax dollars in local park and recreation services as a result of the Great Recession it appears that members of the public have a growing appreciation for the contributions of leisure to an increasingly broad set of relevant social issues. For example, through the lens of health and wellbeing, an increasing proportion of Americans appreciate the role of parks and associated services as an element of the healthcare system (Mowen et al., 2017), and believe parks and recreation services contribute to their health and wellbeing (Pitas, Barrett, Mowen, Graefe, Godbey, & Sciamanna, 2017). These and other contributions must continue to be explored, and their existence shared within and without the field. Those within the field must be able and willing to push the boundaries and explore new contributions or examine existing contributions from novel perspectives.

Evidence suggests however, that local park and recreation services have continually fallen short of their core mission to deliver benefits in an equitable fashion to all members of the community, regardless of race or ethnicity (Pitas et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2020). The failure of local park

and recreation services goes beyond inequitable benefit provision however, as public spaces have long been at the forefront of racialized profiling, oppression, and violence (e.g. Mowatt, 2018; Mowatt et al., 2018). Although discrimination and disenfranchisement have a long and sordid history in parks and recreation in the United States, higher degree programs in leisure studies may be uniquely positioned to help train a new generation of practitioners and advocates with the skills and desire to dismantle the systems that reinforce inequity, and create new environments for recreation, sport, play, travel, and learning that genuinely advance the cause of social justice.

Identifying collaborators

Finally, leisure studies must continue to look outward and identify meaningful connections to other fields of practice. While there have long been calls for increasing communication and collaboration with other fields (e.g. Burton & Jackson, 1989), it may be more critical now more than ever in light of the impacts of the Great Recession. As a result of the decreasing investment of public tax dollars in local park and recreation services, the model for leisure service delivery has changed: local agencies are being forced to utilize increasingly entrepreneurial approaches to fundraising, nonprofit partners are being relied upon to a greater degree to provide services, and public agencies are being asked to provide “more with less” (Walls, 2014). Addressing this increasingly varied service mandate will require collaboration between local park and recreation agencies and a variety of partners, including other aspects of local government, other leisure service providers, and nonprofit partners. It will also require collaboration between local park and recreation agencies and the academic departments that serve to educate and credential future professionals. In 2010, Henderson argued that communication and collaboration within and without leisure studies was critical for its survival, and we make the same assertion today in the post-recession world.

Challenges and concerns are normal occurrences for any academic discipline, and the issues we have presented here related to the Great Recession are only the latest iteration facing leisure studies. It may be that the Great Recession represents a real “sky-falling” moment for local parks and recreation, ushering in a new normal for leisure studies. It may also be another in a long succession of acorns, which forces leisure studies to evolve and change, and to eventually reach a new homeostasis; to wit, it is worth noting while we are still reckoning with the impacts of the Great Recession, another global crisis has arisen in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic which threatens to undermine the institutions that support leisure studies. Much of this will be determined by factors beyond the control of practitioners and advocates of leisure studies; leisure studies is subject to many of the same external cultural and economic factors that influence funding for local park and recreation agencies. To some extent however, this will depend on the way that leisure studies reacts to those external factors. Given the potential benefits to individuals, communities, and society at large that leisure studies may provide, we hope that “leisure researchers, educators, and practitioners . . . have the courage to recognize that change is occurring,” that “acorns are falling, but the sky has not fallen yet,” and act accordingly (Henderson, 2010, p. 399).

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