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Leadership Renewal in Recreation and Parks

“Too often we throw out leisure options in the hope that they’ll stick like velcro. We need to be equipped and motivated to facilitate change.”

Doug Brimacombe
Senior Liaison, Leadership & Professional Development
(ARPA/University of Alberta/ATPR)

New work demands new skills

Equipping recreation and parks for leadership

You’ll find recreation and parks practitioners working indoors and out, planning community recreation, leading fitness sessions, managing facilities and parks, running events and more. Increasingly, those who prove adept at engaging people in recreation are also being trusted to play leadership roles as community connectors and catalysts. Bridging disciplines and sectors, they draw multiple partners to the table to tackle important issues alongside the citizens they serve.

That expanded role extends to the provincial arena, where ARPA and allies are being invited to weigh in on such

significant issues as regional land use planning, after-school programming and provincial recreation policy.

In that environment, the need for wise leadership and fully equipped practitioners is greater than ever. The urgency of this need comes just as a large group of leaders is exiting through retirement. This passing of the baton creates opportunities to hire new talent with vision and skills that fit the needs of the day, but also poses challenges.

The transition is complicated by the fact that training and research have not kept pace with the field’s changing role. Fortunately, a strategy is emerging that promises to address the training and intelligence gap. Training is one of the key priorities in *Foundations for Action: Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta*, a collaborative plan for creating a province where everyone enjoys quality of life.

Recreation and parks is not alone in its looming staffing crisis. Other not-for-profit disciplines also report a dearth of people ready and willing to step into roles left open by retirement and resignation. Because the skills needed by other quality of life fields overlap with those required to propel recreation and parks forward, joint training opportunities are sure to surface.

That’s the beauty of working better together in the spirit of *Foundations for Action*. Together, we are using today’s staffing challenge as a springboard to integrated, relevant learning that equips our crucial field, and indeed the entire Quality of Life sector, to make a difference for individuals, communities and environments all across Alberta.

INSIDE

- Shifting the way we teach.....2
- A plan for renewal in training and research...3
- Strategies for equipping the field3
- Recreation and parks: poised to lead4
- Find out more4



Shifting the way we teach

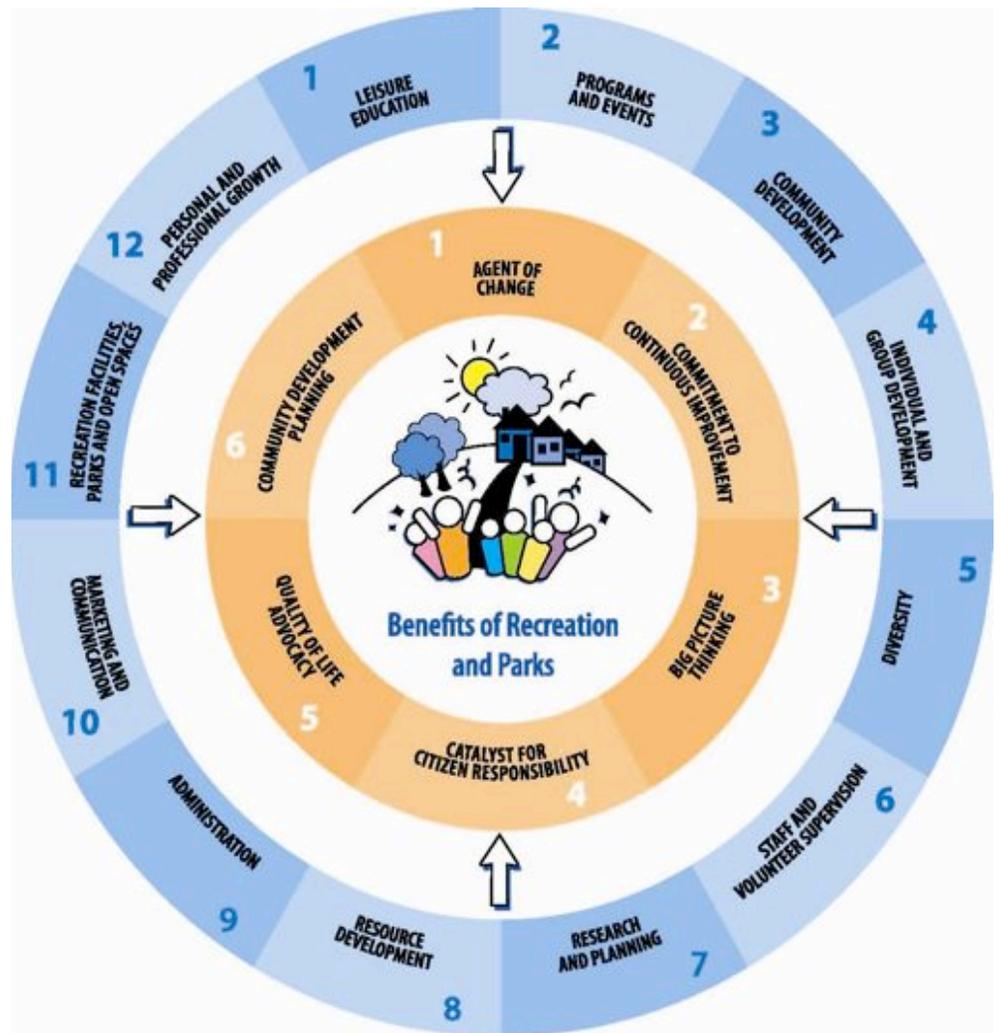
The changing nature of recreation and parks requires a parallel evolution in training, both at the entry level and in ongoing professional development.

In the decades since the University of Alberta launched Canada's first Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, training has evolved to include important concepts and skills. Students learn why recreation enhances human growth and development, how groups interact, how to help build communities and neighbourhoods, how to plan policies and programs, how to manage facilities and outdoor spaces—and much more.

While those core concepts remain valid, the field's shift into a facilitative role requires another layer of skills that has not been integrated into education programs. A recent provincial recreation industry labour market study shows clear gaps between recreation training and frontline realities. Left unaddressed, the gaps would widen over time, as university/college teaching and research tends to be driven more by the specialized expertise and research interests of faculty members than by community needs.

What sort of staff do communities need to take full advantage of the benefits offered by recreation and parks? The concentric circles on this page capture the breadth of skills required.

Communities need practitioners who know how to engage and motivate people of diverse ages, abilities and interests in activities that enrich their lives. Whatever their circumstance or cultural roots, citizens need to feel welcome and valued both in recreation settings and around planning tables.



Core (outer circle) and advanced (inner circle) competencies for recreation and parks practitioners

Especially as staff advance in their careers, they must be big picture thinkers who strive for improvement and know how to lead communities through growth and change. They must become increasingly adept at building relationships of trust, nurturing grassroots leadership and helping people gain insight and skill.

In learning as in work, the focus is shifting from going it alone to partnership, from top-down leadership to leadership that is grassroots-up, distributed and collaborative. Besides knowing what makes individuals tick, the new recreation and parks practitioner needs to know how to draw the very best out of each group, so that all citizens benefit in the end.

With such leadership at all levels, recreation and parks will play a key role in turning this province toward an enriched and sustainable future.

"What does it take to close the gap between the potential of recreation and parks and the benefits people realize? Not power—we can't force this. Rather, influence. And influence depends on relationships of mutual trust and respect."

*Doug Brimacombe
Senior Liaison
Leadership & Professional Development
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A plan for renewal in education and research

While entry level training in recreation and parks typically occurs in post-secondary institutions, ARPA plays a key role in ongoing professional development and in nurturing emerging leaders. As a result, ARPA is well positioned to work with the institutions involved (the University of Alberta, Mount Royal University and other community colleges and institutions) to shape a post secondary training continuum that will equip the field to meet emergent needs.

Foundations for Action recommends looking for creative ways to integrate new and emerging skills into the curriculum. Not-for-profit sector management, for example, could become part of recreation education and/or business programs, potentially through a joint degree, diploma and/or certificate. The plan also calls for more effective applied learning and fieldwork experiences. One option would offer recent

recreation graduates two-year apprenticeships throughout Alberta, a potential boon for rural communities as well as emerging leaders in the field. A congress of post-secondary institutions is suggested as one way to gather and vet such ideas.

The field is also being hampered

“Rather than having the specialization of a brain surgeon, the recreation and parks practitioner should be likened to a family doctor who has an extensive but broader base of general knowledge and skills.”

Vocational Competencies for Recreation and Parks Practitioners

ARPA Education and Professional Development Committee, 2008

by gaps in research. Recreation and parks leaders have done some research, often to inform policy analysis. An excellent example is the work done to catalogue the benefits of recreation and parks. But because professors’ research is often quite specialized and

students’ work tends to extend that knowledge, little academic research in Alberta focuses on the frontline work of community recreation and parks. To advance, the field needs grounding and investment in a focused program of relevant applied and translational research.

Various partners are currently exploring the potential for a “Centre of Excellence for Recreation, Community and Quality of Life” that would serve as a hub for commissioning and disseminating research and information, among other roles. Besides print and electronic resources, the Centre would also be home to a network of outreach coaches who would work directly with community recreation and parks practitioners in the spirit of the former provincial regional recreation services.

Various ARPA initiatives are proving that community coaching can itself be a valuable source of on-the-job training and development. Watching coaches at work, being connected to other coaches, having access to other resources, and having their work externally validated, local leaders feel a great sense of hope that things can truly be better in their communities.

Strategies for equipping the field

Foundations for Action proposes the following strategies to speed the work of equipping recreation and parks for the role it is poised to play in tomorrow’s Alberta:

- Career awareness strategy. Alert students of the range of careers in the industry and the related educational opportunities in Alberta.
- Career preparation strategy. Institute ongoing review of post-secondary recreation education and training to ensure a match with changing needs and identify best use of delivery options such as online, distance and practicum training.
- Career development strategy. Integrate and expand learning options for those already in the field, and do more to mentor emerging leaders. Ideally, this would include a work experience program offering apprenticeships throughout Alberta for recent recreation graduates.



Photo credit: Yane, Dreamstime.com

Recreation and parks: poised to lead

The recreation and parks field stands at a crossroads. With its heritage of engaging people in activities that improve both lives and landscapes, the field holds a key to the Alberta we all want our children to inherit.

Those on the frontlines who have earned trust are attracting invitations to serve important roles as community connectors and catalysts. At the provincial level as well, the field stands poised to play a vital role in shifting leadership from top-down to the grassroots-up, collaborative style needed to address today's complex, interconnected issues.

As many of the early leaders who shaped recreation and parks move into retirement, the field's ability to mature depends on attracting the best and brightest—and inspiring them to be passionate human wellness enthusiasts and community builders. That, in turn, depends on renewed and relevant education, research, coaching and professional development.



Photo credit: Dreamstime.com

Recreation's expanded impact

As their work across boundaries proves valuable, recreation and parks practitioners need the skills to ensure that their field fulfills these significant roles:

- Strengthen community identity and sense of place
- Protect natural capital
- Strengthen community safety and security
- Foster human development and lifelong learning
- Promote health, wellness and active living
- Promote citizenship and community leadership
- Facilitate community capacity building
- Increase social inclusion and cultural unity
- Provide quality, relevant recreation experiences
- Develop and manage infrastructure
- The breadth and relevance of the work makes this field attractive to people who see their career as a calling rather than simply as a job.

The work of renewal has already begun, raising hope that tomorrow's recreation and parks practitioners will have what it takes to meet the needs of the day, and beyond. They will take on new and important roles, empowering people to work together toward a better future.

Today's recreation and parks practitioners are accomplishing great things with minimal resources. They're doing so many things right. Think what will be accomplished when they are equipped to do that final slice of their job differently. The impact? Truly astounding.

"Community building is all about building relationships, helping others, empowering people, connecting people, helping them to dream and believe in themselves, and helping them to not feel alone. This is why most of us got into this profession in the first place, but over time many of us seem to have lost our focus. We haven't lost our love for the profession, but we have forgotten what it is we love about it: the community-building aspect."

Ed Everett

Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters
ICMA IQ Report, 2009

Find out more

This bulletin is part of a series based on *Foundations for Action*, a collaborative action plan for Alberta wellness and quality of life. The plan draws from the insights of individuals and agencies from many disciplines that share the vision of a future Alberta with healthy people, sustainable environments and strong vital communities. *Foundations for Action* is a key outcome of Vision 2015, a project that is linking the good work of organizations, government and agencies and creating new ways to make a difference together. ARPA is pleased to provide leadership for Vision 2015. For a full copy of *Foundations for Action*, go to the Vision 2015 website at www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca.