

**Parks and Recreation Management Program
Department of Human Services
College of Education and Allied Professions
Western Carolina University**

External Review Report

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I. Introduction

The Parks and Recreation Management (PRM) Program review occurred from Sunday, February 28 through Tuesday, March 1, 2016. Preparations for the visit were coordinated by the Office for Planning and Effectiveness (David Onder and Pam Buchanan). Prior to the visit, the review team received electronic copies of the PRM Program's self-study and had access to the University's website for additional documents. A conference call was held a week before the visit to go over schedule details and logistics.

The campus visit was organized with a schedule of meetings and related activities as well as some time for report preparation. The first evening began with dinner for the review team hosted by the Provost, Dr. Alison Morrison-Shetlar. Provost Morrison-Shetlar provided an overview of the university, financial issues, and the value of the review process.

The second day's schedule began with a breakfast meeting with Associate Provost, Dr. Carol Burton, and Assessment Director, Mr. David Onder. The reviewers then spent time with Associate Dean of the College of Education and Allied Professions (CEAP), Dr. Kim Winter, who was representing the Dean of the College who was out of town. The rest of the morning included meetings with the Department Chair of Human Services, Dr. Phyllis Robertson, and meetings with Program Director, Dr. Ben Tholkes, and incoming Program Director, Dr. Andrew Bobilya. Lunch was shared with 10 PRM students who represented their views of the program and their experiences as students. Afternoon meetings included meeting with full-time PRM faculty (Ms. Debby Singleton, Dr. Maurice Phipps, and Dr. Andrew Bobilya). The review team also interacted with adjunct faculty (Todd Murdock, Tanya Poole, Rebecca Lindsay, Bill Clarke, and Sam Fowlkes) for an hour. The day was concluded with work time for the review team.

The third day began with a facilities tour of Reid Gym hosted by Drs. Tholkes, Phipps, and Bobilya. The team then met with the Director of Campus Wellness and Recreation, Dr. Shauna Sleight and the graduate assistant for Base Camp, Lindsay. A pre-exit meeting was held with Dr. Kim Winter followed by an exit meeting with Provost Morrison-Shetlar, Associate Provost Carol Burton, Associate CEAP Dean Kim Winters, Department Chair Phyllis Robertson, Assessment Director David Onder, Program Director Ben Tholkes, and faculty members Debby Singleton, Maurice Phipps, and Andrew Bobilya. The exit meeting provided a way to summarize the team's findings and preliminary recommendations. After additional work time, the review team had lunch and a debriefing about the review process with Mr. David Onder and Dr. Carol Burton.

This remainder of this report is presented in five parts as requested by the *Suggested Outline for External Review Report*: analysis of the program, analysis of faculty, analysis of operational

facilities and budget, summary of program strengths and areas of improvement, and summary of recommendations.

II. Analysis of Program (Undergraduate Program Only)

The undergraduate program has a long and strong history. We were particularly impressed by the way that the curriculum has used the natural resources of the area to develop interesting and exciting nature-based courses. The curriculum aims to be broad with foci in five areas that students can choose regarding their guided electives: community recreation, outdoor leadership and instruction, natural resource management, commercial and resort management, and fitness and wellness. Students have a core of courses that all are required to take, and then have the opportunity to choose guided electives, and potentially a minor, to support their career goals. Students are able to make adequate progress toward their degrees, largely because the guided electives are broad and flexible. The core courses are heavily oriented toward outdoor skills, which is likely based on the current expertise of the faculty. The program is advertised as a PRM major, and yet the reputation of the curriculum as well as the coursework and career expectations of students is mainly related to the outdoors. In addition, although the courses in PRM are open to non-majors, a potential exists to develop some university core and perspective courses that would have a broad appeal to the student body. Additional courses such as these should not be added without an assessment of what currently exists as core and elective courses within PRM.

The students with whom we spoke were delightful. They were articulate, passionate, and thoughtful. They feel they have a personal relationship with faculty who have mentored them in numerous ways. The faculty/student ratio seems appropriate in terms of the number of advisees each full time faculty member has. The students have opportunities for three 1-credit mini-internships as well as a capstone 400 hour internship that prepares them well for choosing their career emphasis in PRM as well as connecting them to a broader professional world. PRM has taken some steps to manage enrollment by requiring a 2.5 GPA and by requiring students to write an entry essay regarding their interest in PRM. The students appeared to represent a diversity of geographic origins, at least from North Carolina. The students with whom we spoke were oriented primarily toward outdoor careers, which we suspect represents all students in the major even though three other focus areas were possible.

The planning and assessment strategies used by the program were commendable. The use of the university's QEP has enabled faculty to consider their approaches to education as well as how and what students have learned. The requirement of a comprehensive final exam for all students graduating from the program has further enabled the faculty to assess student learning. This exam is part of a capstone course and provides students with opportunities to reflect on their learning in studying for the exam. Records show that on average, students receive scores of 87% on the 150 point exam. The exam is developed by faculty from the core courses, and students also have input into what they believed were the important concepts that they needed to address. The weakness of the assessment program is that it needs a further "closing of the loop." In other words, how does doing student assessment result in curriculum and course improvement. The assessment process is likely addressing improvement, but we saw no direct evidence that assessments were evaluated to specific curriculum change within PRM.

III. Analysis of Faculty

- a. The faculty members are highly qualified in their areas of expertise and clearly committed to the education of competent professionals. All hold degrees and practical experience in areas that enable them to be effective teachers. The recent hire of Dr. Bobilya also adds an important level of demonstrated scholarship for the faculty. Two of the faculty members have been with WCU for many years and are nearing retirement. Ms. Singleton recently joined PRM as a full-time fixed term faculty member (formerly she had been only half-time with PRM).
- b. The faculty members appear to be well supported by the institution. They have adequate faculty offices, and seemed to be treated equally compared to their peers in the CEAP. The Department Chair understands who they are and put great effort into advocating for the needs of faculty and students in PRM. The standards applied across the campus for personnel decisions, salaries, and access to travel funds also apply to this faculty, as evidenced in their comments. In the past two years, the needs for new and better equipment to be used in the curriculum, especially outdoor equipment, has been addressed. The major issue is the lack of adequate lab space for almost a dozen core and guided courses in the Department. The allocation is a university-wide program, we recognize, but for a program like PRM that has many experiential aspects to coursework, the availability of a dedicated space exclusive to PRM is important.
- c. The faculty members are highly engaged in teaching and in providing the best possible hands-on experiences for students. They also appear to be involved in campus as well as community service activities through the efforts of their students. The partnerships developed across the region with federal, state, and private organizations is laudable. Faculty also have been involved to some extent in state and national service over the past years through participation in professional conferences. Andrew Bobilya, for example, is currently co-editor of the *Journal of Recreation and Outdoor Leadership*. The scholarship output of faculty has not been high nor has their generation of external research funds. Future faculty hires may need to up the scholarly reputation of the PRM program at WCU. With the diversity and nature of the coursework offered through PRM, adequate time for scholarship may not always be available.

IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget

- a. As noted above, lab space for classwork, although available, may create additional work for faculty. The designation of a dedicated lab space, as discussed later, may be a means to enhance the educational mission. Another issue raised was the need for a facilitation or adventure challenge course. Evidently a commercial course has been rented in the past, but the owners are now retiring and will no longer make the course available. The alternatives to a course are not adequate at this point. The university has evidently discussed constructing such a course, but progress has been slow.
- b. Regarding the budget, PRM seems to have their share of resources for teaching and engagement. The use of one-time money to purchase needed equipment has been greatly

appreciated. However, a plan is not yet in place for how this equipment can be maintained and replaced over time. Much of the equipment used for outdoor pursuits, in particular, requires continual replacement on a scheduled cycle to assure it is safe to use.

V. Summary of Program Strengths and Areas for Improvement

a. General Impressions

The review team was favorably impressed with the PRM Program at WCU. The program is implemented by a team of highly qualified and committed faculty. The program has been designated as a priority program within the university and complements the #1 adventure program status connected with WCU in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. The students are excited about their education in PRM, and feel they have been given classroom and experiential opportunities that prepare them for PRM careers. The educational environment is further enhanced by the use of adjunct faculty to provide additional educational opportunities particularly related to guided electives. All faculty provide a nurturing environment that also challenges students to perform at their best. The program is highly regarded among professional peers in the state, WCU administrators, faculty colleagues, and by the students themselves. The location in the mountains of western North Carolina provides a plethora of internship opportunities particularly related to the outdoors. The review team sees the Program at a crossroads with an opportunity to solidify their identity within the department, college, university, region, and profession.

b. Areas of Strength

The review team recognized a number of significant strengths that highlight the general success of the program as well as unique qualities denoting a *program of distinction*. The following strengths represent noteworthy attributes that should receive continued support and commitment:

- Faculty demonstrate a high level of expertise in their respective specialty areas. Outdoor leadership development, natural resource recreation management, and community-based leisure services make up the primary expertise areas that reflect current curricular goals as well as the greater career landscape of Western North Carolina. Attention to these attributes in future faculty hiring is critical to preserve the curricular niche created by PRM. Further, a cadre of experienced adjuncts further strengthens PRM.
- The reviewers recognized the supportive student environment developed through a conscious commitment by the PRM faculty. This culture of support appears to be a driving force in student retention and overall student academic competence. PRM has an exceptional retention and graduation rate, which should be recognized as an important metric when making decisions around resource allocation.
- The review team identified strengths and areas of improvement regarding the curriculum. The primary strength revolves around a sound core supported by flexible focus areas. Because the focus areas do not represent a prescriptive formula found in most traditional concentrations or emphasis formats, flexibility is tremendous in tailoring a program to

meet individual career aspirations. This flexibility also allows for the use of previously earned electives and course work to ensure graduation in a timely manner.

- The curriculum is also supported by sound course designs as reflected in the syllabi supplied for the program review. These syllabi along with student testimony confirm the experiential nature of the program and power of hands-on experiences.
- The PRM internship requirements reflect crucial capstone experiences necessary to make this professional preparation program successful. The faculty has effectively developed partnerships and nurtured outside relationships in the region to create these formative experiences. The variety of internship site choices is a major factor in ensuring individual student needs are met.
- Overall, the curriculum and departmental service initiatives interface well with the regional attributes of western North Carolina. The importance of embracing the natural environment as a focal point should continue and be further developed to define the overall mission of PRM.
- The program review process implemented by WCU is conducive to the professional accreditation processes available to PRM. The WCU model puts PRM in a position to complete the Council on Accreditation for Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT). PRM currently has the faculty and assessment strategies in place to obtain accreditation. Systems are also in place should PRM decide to achieve Wilderness Education Association (WEA) accreditation for the outdoor leadership portion of the curriculum.
- Students are screened into the program to assure that they understand the expectations and career possibilities. An entry essay and GPA requirement (2.5) assure that students are choosing the right major, and therefore are likely to remain in the program until they graduate. In addition, a comprehensive exam upon coursework completion also checks to assure that students have learned the necessary core requirements to be successful in their chosen professional careers. Further, students feel as a result of their curricula in PRM that they have learned how to think, problem solve, and manage their time.

c. Opportunities for Improvement

- Establishing what will (or should be) the identity of the program in the future is essential. Determining what makes the PRM program distinctive at WCU as well as among sister institutions in NC is important. As noted, the degree is in PRM with five informal focus areas demonstrated through choosing guided electives. Many of the core and most of the PRM electives are outdoor oriented. The identity of the program as a broad PRM degree with a balanced number of guided electives representing the focus areas should be considered. Alternatively, the

program is more outdoor-oriented so perhaps the curriculum should be developed with the intent that students will work in outdoor areas that may be related to government, community, or private organizations. The decisions need not be either/or but it should be clear to students whether they will have a broad PRM degree with some area of chosen specialty or whether they will have an outdoor-based PRM degree.

- The PRM program is in the College of Education and Allied Professions and is within the Department of Human Services. Given the social and human services nature of the curriculum, PRM is in the appropriate home. However, articulating the connections to Human Services is necessary as well as making the tie to how PRM is about non-formal education, after-school education, or whatever terms best fit. PRM has its roots in education and in human services, and these connections should be used philosophically and pragmatically to further build the connections and identity into the future.
- The core courses are strong, but perhaps they can be evaluated to determine if they are the appropriate courses that constitute a core so that every student has a solid base in PRM regardless of the focus area. Perhaps more emphasis can be placed on revising the core with PRM outdoor oriented guided electives balanced between outdoor classes and other possible electives related to community recreation.
- The guided electives are flexible and enable students to complete the degree in a timely manner. However, the students might be better prepared professionally if the focus areas are more consistent to assure that students are getting elective courses that enhance their PRM specialties. In addition, our observation suggested that most students were interested in outdoor leadership, natural resource management, and broadly defined community recreation. The focus areas of commercial and resort management as well as fitness and wellness seemed to be of minor interest. Specific suggestions are included in the summary of recommendations. Identifying a stronger core and fewer focus areas would also solidify what faculty resources are needed in the future.
- The facilitation of (outdoor) recreation experiences appears to be an important part of the curriculum. A challenge adventure course would also have numerous possibilities for use in other curricula such as counseling and recreational therapy. Having a long-term venue for teaching facilitation courses would be critical to the education of students both within PRM and across the campus.
- Accreditation by a professional body has external and internal advantages for a program such as PRM. A keen interest seems to exist among faculty for moving forward with COAPRT accreditation, and this process would enable the re-visioning of the core requirements as well as further enhancing the curriculum assessment processes.

- Since many students might choose to come to WCU because of the outdoor and nature-based opportunities, general elective courses might be of interest to a broader university student body that could contribute to FTE generation. Offering general electives might mean that some guided electives taught in PRM would be eliminated. With only 3-4 faculty, new initiatives cannot be developed without considering what might be revised or eliminated.
- Teaching could be enhanced by dedicated lab space for instruction, especially for the outdoor-based program. The Department of Human Services and PRM should advocate for a dedicated space in the future.
- The QEP process has given PRM a good foundation for assessing student learning outcomes in general. Other than the comprehensive exam results, no other measures were presented based on the assignments, rubrics, quizzes, and other capture points identified in the QEP matrix. Documenting learning outcome results and articulating curricular changes based on these results would be necessary if COAPRT Accreditation, in particular, was pursued. Determining whether outcomes are being met and developing a plan for program improvement based on data about outcomes could assure that students are learning what faculty are teaching.
- Faculty members have been active teachers and have provided excellent community service and collaborations. Scholarship has been adequate but new tenure-track hires will need to focus on scholarship and research as well as state and national service.
- A Masters program in experiential education would be an important addition to PRM, but perhaps other issues should be addressed first before efforts are put into establishing another degree program. More scholarship from faculty would likely be necessary before justification could be made for a Master's program. The Masters should be an aspirational goal to be kept alive after other changes are made in solidifying the curriculum and stabilizing new faculty hires. If the faculty have a desire to expedite the process, they should seriously consider partnering with existing Master programs in the college.
- The program makes use of various types of equipment to run their program. A plan should be put into place to assure the maintenance of equipment and a planned rotation of new equipment on a regular basis. An annual equipment budget would be highly desirable.
- Although adjuncts seem to be performing exceptionally well, opportunities may exist to provide support for new adjuncts in the future.

VI. Summary of Recommendations

The following summary serves as a synthesis of the key observations and findings of the review team. The following represents four interrelated recommendations to support the strengths and opportunities for improvement articulated above.

Recommendation 1

PRM finds itself at an apparent crossroads as two senior faculty members commit to phased retirement and the new full-time faculty begin their tenure. Historically, PRM has experienced physical relocations and restructuring within the WCU system. PRM is now housed in the Department of Human Services within the College of Education and Allied Professions. PRM has a rich history of remaking its curriculum to align with faculty expertise, student demand, and regional characteristics. At present, PRM's outdoor-based curriculum has served as a source of pride, identity, and student satisfaction for a significant number of years.

During the program review, the review team noted a diversity of thoughts and opinions from all constituent groups around the academic focus of PRM. The review team recommends that PRM re-evaluate its identity, which will drive all major decisions during this time of transition. It is not the purpose of the review team to suggest a specific direction but rather reflect realistic options conducive to fit within the department, college, university, and region. The potential directions below are examples discussed during the review.

Direction 1: This option involves refining the outdoor leadership theme already present in the curriculum. As PRM faculty rethink learning outcomes, should all PRM graduates possess foundational outdoor knowledge, skills, and dispositions? Should PRM brand itself as the WCU program that graduates outdoor professionals who are able to work in all sectors of the outdoor industry? If the answers are yes, the larger vision would be to produce human service professionals who use nature and the outdoors to serve others. These professionals could function in capacities as outdoor educators, outdoor recreation programmers, natural resource managers, and outdoor business entrepreneurs.

Direction 2: Another feasible direction would be to embrace a contemporary vision of a PRM professional. This would consist of producing leisure service professionals with academic foundations in general management, programming, and leadership skills. This broader vision would enable graduates to find employment as recreation programmers and managers in diverse settings. As opposed to the outdoor leadership thread tying the curriculum together, a more general leisure and recreation services philosophy would define the curriculum. PRM would brand itself as the WCU program that produces recreation professionals committed to serving the diverse leisure needs of the public. If PRM decided to take this more global route and was still committed to the outdoor leadership curriculum, it could be delivered through a formal emphasis area such as a minor or concentration.

Recommendation 2

- Taking into consideration the potential directions outlined above, the review team recommends that PRM re-evaluate its core curriculum. When embarking on this task, decisions should be driven based on learning outcomes. Outcomes should reflect the desired knowledge, skills, and dispositions that graduates should be able to demonstrate. The review team will refrain from making specific suggestions around the removal or additions to the curriculum. Again, this must be driven by specific learning outcomes determined by the PRM faculty. However, the review team will share other models to stimulate brainstorming to stimulate creative new ideas. For example, other programs do not require first aid courses. They require first aid certification that can be wrapped into another course, or be a requirement necessary before graduation that could be obtained in other ways. Other PRM related programs have removed specialty classes such as outdoor recreation classes and recreation therapy related classes from the core. Many programs combine the logistics of obtaining their internships, career preparation, and a senior seminar experience into one class. It is not uncommon for the internship to be a semester long experience based on variable credit options ranging from 6 to 12 semester credits. Courses such as program evaluation/research methods and facility design and maintenance are common classes found within core curricula.

A final recommendation regarding curriculum relates to the existing focus areas. As outlined in the strengths and opportunities for improvement, the current focus area format deserves attention. One way to strive for improvement would be to simplify and combine the five focus areas into two focused tracks. For example, recreation resource management and outdoor leadership and instruction could be combined into a single outdoor leadership track. The remainder of the focus areas could be combined into a recreation leadership track. Students can still gravitate towards areas of interest within these two inclusive focus areas. The collapsing of the focus areas would serve as a more flexible structure to integrate diverse course combinations. The term *leadership* in both track titles provides a recognizable theme supported by the core.

Recommendation 3

- No matter the direction faculty take in rebranding the department or reworking the core curriculum, the review team recommends that PRM faculty prepare for professional accreditation as opposed to the required in-house review process five years from now. Because of the faculty's excellent work through the QEP and in-house review process, much is already in place to successfully gain a national accreditation. Resource support for the accreditation process is evident based on discussions with college administrators. During the review, PRM faculty expressed the desire and importance of obtaining national accreditation particularly through the Council on Accreditation for Parks, Recreation, Tourism, and Allied Professions (COAPRT). The standards are readily available through the NRPA website. PRM currently has the faculty, curriculum, learning outcome format, and university support to successfully obtain accreditation. As long as the department maintains two, full-time tenure track positions and one full-time equivalent position, accreditation is a reality. As shared previously and in the final review meeting, the learning outcome loop will have to be completed by collecting outcome data. The college can support data collection and guide faculty members through the

process. Attending the annual COAPRT training by a PRM faculty member will help alleviate many of the unknowns around the process. Faculty may also use the external reviewers of this visit as a resource.

Recommendation 4

- The final recommendation focuses on facility issues. An on-going area of stress and frustration expressed by the faculty has been the competition for inconsistent classroom and lab space. The review team recommends that dedicated lab space be designated exclusively for PRM use. PRM currently offers eleven classes that require lab space. A significant need exists and is typical for a PRM type program. Because classes, outdoor trips, recreation programs, and experiential activities require open space at all hours, seven days per week, PRM must have a dedicated space to effectively function. This recommendation will make a substantial immediate difference. In addition, if PRM had a dedicated classroom in reasonable proximity to the lab space, there would be a seamless flow to efficiently facilitate the experiential nature of the curriculum.

A final facility observation made by the review team involves the development of a challenge course program. The development of a challenge course program on the WCU campus appears to be perpetual item of business over the years with no clear resolution. PRM has lost access to a local challenge course for its challenge course class. Campus recreation, the Discovery Program, and others see great value in a campus-based program. The review team was informed that the university has or was navigating the state system to find a way to run a challenge course business. Land is available to build an outdoor course and there is potential for an indoor course. Much is already in place to make this important endeavor a reality. Here are some facts supplied by external reviewer Dr. Wagstaff who has had the opportunity to successfully develop challenge course programs on two different university campuses:

- a. Challenge courses, adventure courses, and zip tours serve as a powerful lab environment to develop the student's leadership skills, group management skills, risk management skills, administrative skills, and general critical thinking skills.
- b. After the initial investment in construction and equipment, a well-managed course can break even financially within the first two to three years.
- c. The university will begin to see return on their initial investment within five years.
- d. Challenge course programs serve as an excellent source for grant funding, research, and community support.
- e. An accessible challenge course program will serve the needs of all campus and community populations in the areas of team building, personal growth, therapeutic interventions, corporate development, and general recreation programming.
- f. Committing to the development of a challenge course program is a low risk investment if a sound business plan is followed and supported by a qualified challenge course professional.

In conclusion, we appreciated the opportunity to learn about this important and excellent PRM Program at WCU. This major is essential in a world where people need opportunities for pursuits

to enhance their quality of life as well as to reduce stress in the globalized world. The PRM program is highly regarded and has made remarkable contributions to the profession. It is poised to make greater contributions in the future with a re-thinking and re-visioning of the possibilities for such a program in the 21st century. As reviewers we appreciated the honesty and thoughtfulness from all individuals (administrators, faculty colleagues, and students) who participated in this review.