Making A Case For Parks And Recreation - This I Believe

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I often tell people, my team and I at the NC Recreation and Park Association(NCRPA) have the best recreation and park jobs in North Carolina. Why is that so? NCRPA is an organization that is in many ways the intersection of state and municipal recreation, non-profit training and advocacy, commercial innovation, and university education and research. While the majority of the individuals I work with are on the municipal side, my work allows me the opportunity to support, engage and partner with professionals from across the field to create a variety of innovative programs and initiatives that support the advancement of the park, recreation and leisure profession. Yet there is a constant theme that creeps into every conversation, a question of how do we tell our story and quantify the value of parks and recreation, how do we help citizens and stakeholders understand why parks and recreation is the most essential, non-essential service.

So how do we quantify our access to parks, recreation and leisure time, what does this even mean? Is it through an evidence-based youth outreach or wellness programs? An economic impact study on the benefits of hosting sports tournaments? Is it tracking a run or physical activity with a Fitbit or Apple Watch? Is it an academic study on mental, physical and environmental benefits of access to green and open space? The fact is that these concepts among many others are all ways we can quantify parks, recreation and leisure, its what we do with the information, and how it helps us tell our story that allows us to make a case for the importance of parks and recreation. To me, our success relies on our ability to measure and communicate why parks and recreation has a positive effect on our health and wellness, the economy, and helps to create stronger communities by enhancing both social equity and capital, because regardless of how you frame it, leisure, parks, and recreation make lives better. This is even more evident when access to leisure and recreation are made equitable to all members of a community regardless of their socio-economic status. Recreation and leisure is a right of all citizens, and it is the duty of the park, recreation and leisure profession to develop programs, policy, planning, and infrastructure that helps to enable equitable access. Fortunately for me, I am uniquely positioned to

engage, empower and bring park, recreation, and leisure professionals together to advance the profession and find innovative solutions to enable equitable access to leisure and recreation.

To understand why recreation and leisure should be a right of all citizens we need first to define the terms that frame it. Leisure can be defined as the time or ability we have to engage in an activity that has no inherent purpose except to engage in personal engagement and satisfaction, free from obligation. Lee (2017) defined leisure as "An experience that is most likely to occur during freely chosen interactions characterized by a high degree of personal engagement that is motivated by the intrinsic satisfaction that is expected to result." (p.9) Recreation can be defined as an aspect of leisure that has a planned aspect or intended outcome beyond personal engagement and satisfaction. Cordes (2017) describes Recreation as the voluntary participation in leisure activities that are meaningful and enjoyable to the person involved. Cordes (2017) further defines recreation as embracing both indoor and outdoor activities; recreation refers to sports and exercise as well as to less physically active pursuits. "As this definition makes clear, recreation is one aspect of the broader term leisure, which encompasses not only vigorous activities such as softball and hiking but also sedentary hobbies such as coin and stamp collecting as well as more passive pastimes such as dozing in a hammock or getting a relaxing facial." (Cordes, 2013 p. 7) Personally, I think of leisure, sport, and recreation as three distinct but intertwined experiences. This concept can apply to many of the things we do as humans, such as aimlessly kicking a soccer ball as leisure, a pickup game or learning skills at summer camp as recreation and finally playing in an official capacity such as a game or team practice as sport. In the end, it comes down to how one experiences a particular period, free and unplanned with leisure, planned and guided with recreation or reaching for an achievement with sport. In the end, leisure should be a right of all and part of the human experience, something that is ingrained in a free society.

But how do we ensure recreation is a right? And why would we use the concepts of social capital, equity, and health? That can be easily answered by defining what each of these terms means and further breaking down their correlations to parks and recreation. First, the World Health Organization's

Charter defines Health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (WHO, 1948) The CDC defines social capital as the “The individual and communal time and energy that is available for such things as community improvement, social networking, civic engagement, personal recreation, and other activities that create social bonds between individuals and groups.” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013) While finally, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation defines Social Justice and Equity as the “The collective responsibility of a free and just society is to ensure that civil and human rights are preserved and protected for each individual regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nation of origin, sexual orientation, class, physical or mental ability, and age.” (Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation) Access to recreation and leisure correlates with a community's, social capital, equity, and health. Bailey, Kang and Schmit’s (2016) findings indicate that one’s routine leisure activities and attitudes can have a significant positive effect on overall happiness, and this path is consistent at different life stages.(pg.1) Understanding the definitions of recreation, leisure, social justice and equity, and health and how these topics intersect is vital to understanding why Parks and Recreation are the most essential, non-essential services.

While the importance of recreation and leisure and the opportunities it provides are usually recognized and applauded, its often constrained by misconceptions, budget shortfalls, misinformation and lack of access. “Just as water, sewer, and public safety are considered essential public services, parks are vitally important to establishing and maintaining the quality of life in a community, ensuring the health of families and youth, and contributing to the economic and environmental well-being of a community and a region.” (NRPA, 2010) Identifying parks and recreation as essential services allow for better access to recreation and leisure, improving the lives and communities. But in a field that encompasses so much, where not one department or agency is like the other, how can we quantify the value of parks to help us tell our story? Simple, break the positive impact of parks and recreation into three relatable categories; health and wellness, social equity and capital, and economic impact.

You don't have to look to see how parks and recreation intersect with health and wellness. “Research shows that using public parks, even tiny local ones in your neighborhood, contributes to health in a number of ways, from promoting physical activity to improving mental health and even having the potential to reduce healthcare costs.” (RWJ Found, 2016) Additionally, Bocarro and Edwards (2016) point out that the parks and recreation field has a long history of managing programs and resources that promote physical activity and health.”(pg. 57) The benefits of parks and recreation communities health and well being are recognized by practitioners, educators, researchers, legislators and much of the public. Much of this is evident in the various partnerships between, parks and recreation, universities, nonprofits and health wellness-minded companies. NCRPA’s partnerships with North Carolina State University, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, and Kids in Parks are just a few examples.

Next, we know parks and recreation builds stronger communities by contributing to social equity and capital. The National Recreation and Park Association reflects on the importance of the field and its impacts on social equity and capital:

> True to the very philosophy of public parks and recreation is the idea that all people – no matter the color of their skin, age, income level or ability – have access to programs, facilities, places and spaces that make their lives and communities great. Parks and recreation truly build communities – communities for all.Social equity is a critical responsibility borne by every public park and recreation agency and the professionals that operate them. It is a right, not just a privilege, for people nationwide to have safe, healthful access to parks and recreation. (NRPA, nd.)

Additional research has shown that parks and recreation can be an important social support mechanism, helping to build social capital and stronger communities. In their 2003 journal article titled Social Capital: How Parks and Recreation Help to Build Community, DeGraaf & Jordan describe why this is so important:

> Parks and recreation participants connect with one another at many levels; they are in the process of building the social capital needed to increase the quality of life of their community. Parks, recreation and leisure services can play an important role in promoting a sense of well-being and happiness, as well as, in promoting close relationships, social support, purpose, and hope. Parks, recreation and leisure services professionals have an opportunity to make conscious choices about making a difference in our communities by promoting the development of social capital. (DeGraaf & Jordan, 2003)

Recreation and leisure is a vital glue that brings communities together, breaks down walls and builds bridges across social, cultural, and demographic groups.

Finally, parks and recreation is not only worth the investment when it comes to health and wellness, and social equity and capital, it often correlates to positive economic impacts in across communities. The business of recreation and leisure, especially the public parks and recreation side, created significant economic impact, creating jobs, increasing property value and infusing tax dollars into communities. According to NRPA, (2015) public recreation and park agencies in North Carolina generate 3 Billion dollars in economic activity, and nationwide local and regional public park agencies generated parks created $140 billion in economic activity, while supporting almost 1 million jobs. (NRPA,2015) Additionally, parks and recreation makes communities and neighborhoods more desirable, helping increase property values and bring new business and development. While there are instances where this can negatively affect social equity, effective community planning and engagement can head off some of the challenges. Regardless when communities have walkable neighborhoods, parks and open spaces, they help to generate economic benefits to local governments, homeowners and businesses through higher property values and correspondingly higher tax assessments. (Active Living Research, 2010) Effectively being able to communicate the positive economic impact of parks and recreation is vital to building support for further investment in parks and recreation form citizens, stakeholders, the business community and legislators.

My professional philosophy is that recreation and leisure makes lives better. Furthermore, access to leisure and recreation should be equitable. Recreation and leisure is a right of all citizens, and it is the duty of the park, recreation and leisure profession to develop programs, policy, planning, and infrastructure that helps to enable equitable access. A great example of an innovative program is the 10-minute walk to a park campaign, which is a partnership between The National Recreation and Park Association, The Trust for Public Land, and the Urban Land Institute. The program challenges cities to create measurable policies and strategies to ensure everyone has a quality park within a 10-minute walk of home. The program was created because the stakeholders recognized that across all age groups, greater access to parks is associated with reduced stress, reduced risk of depression, and greater mental health and well-being. At the same time, they identified that one in three people in the United States– more than 100 million people – don't have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. (NRPA, 2017) The program not only creates awareness of the benefits of parks and recreation, but it identifies shortfalls and gaps in access, while challenging citizens, stakeholders, and civic leaders to develop sustainable and quantifiable solutions to ensure citizens in their communities have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of their home.

In the end, this is what I know, I believe that parks and recreation is a field that genuinely makes the lives of those it serves better, and in my current job, positions me to lead efforts to help recreation and park professionals positively impact their communities. Recreation and leisure is a vital aspect of our society, and it promotes health and wellness, it builds stronger communities by creating social equity and capital, and is a positive driver of the economy. Parks and recreation as a profession can be an equalizer to equitable access to recreation and leisure. Additionally, I am uniquely positioned to tell the story of why recreation and parks are vital to positively "impacting lives and changing communities". While I may not be the individual who comes up with the next great program or solves a major challenge our field is facing, I know I am positioned to bring the right people together and empower them to tell our story and quantify the value of parks and recreation.

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