

Recreational Choices: The Value of Education as Part of Leisure Programming

Mary F. Fortune¹, Chris Chamberlain¹, Melany Spielman¹, Sylvie Tjoei²

(1. Hospitality, Recreation & Tourism Department, California State University, USA;

2. College of Science California State University, USA)

Abstract: The Recreational Choice study was developed to measure customer preference of leisure programs offered by a Parks and Community Services Department located in the East Bay, California. More females than males responded to the survey (69%) and findings suggest that education gained is a contributing factor for the amount of money participants are willing to spend on a recreation program regardless of age, sex, and education level (69%). Those with higher degrees (82%) placed importance on learning than those with less education. Among the higher education, 37% with two kids under 18-favored education gained. Participants were also willing to drive farther to ensure the needs of their children were met, which spoke to the value of learning as a component of leisure.

Key words: parks and recreation, leisure, education

1. Introduction

The pursuit of recreation and leisure activities increase self-esteem and can have lasting effects on positive behavior towards self and the community. One area of interest is the impact of recreation activities on young people and families. Youth and family participation in a local parks and recreation program can develop feelings of belonging and a more engaged and positive school experience. The result is an expanded educational network and additional support for families as they thrive within the community.

The role of parks and recreation providers becomes valuable and at the core is recreation programming — activities, classes and events that serve the needs of the community. By developing a variety of experiences that include social, cultural, and physical activities in a passive or natural setting, consumers of these experiences can enjoy a greater degree of life satisfaction in their leisure time (Edginton, 2010; Rosenberger R. S., Bergerson T. R., & Kline J. D., 2009).

The evaluation process in parks and recreation programming is both formative and summative (Jordan, 2010). It is about evaluating the worth, efficiency or effectiveness of the program by recreation professionals as seen

Mary F. Fortune, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Hospitality, Recreation & Tourism Department, California State University; research areas: leisure, leadership & event management. E-mail: mary.fortune@csueastbay.edu.

Chris Chamberlain, D.M., Assistant Professor, Hospitality, Recreation & Tourism Department, California State University; research areas: leisure management & community recreation. E-mail: chris.chamberlain@csueastbay.edu.

Melany Spielman, Ph.D., Professor, Hospitality, Recreation & Tourism Department, California State University; research areas: recreation therapy & online learning. E-mail: melany.spielman@csueastbay.edu.

Sylvie Tjoei, Masters Statistic Student, College of Science, California State University; research areas: statistics & accounting. E-mail: stjoei@horizon.csueastbay.edu.

through the eyes of their customers. In practice, successful municipal recreation agencies constantly evaluate not only customer/participant needs and satisfaction but also current trends, cultural, and age variables and educational interests. Because customers weigh cost and travel time, the long-term benefits of the program are a consideration when enrolling in a recreation program.

For the parent looking to recreation programming as a means of improving academic skills, Crompton (2008) found improvements in academic performance are likely linked to three factors: (1) the quality and quantity of academic elements in the program; (2) the capacity of the recreational components in the after school program to improve students in regular school hours, and (3) gains in personal and social skills, and in self-esteem which encourage students to recognize the importance of good academic performance (p. 255). In large, municipal areas, customers may have more than one city parks and recreation program to choose. To determine what other considerations customers use to make their purchasing choices a study was conducted.

2. Purpose and Theoretic Approach

The purpose of the RC study was to examine the role recreational programs had on consumer choices related to education and the programs offered by a local parks and recreation department. Rational choice theory was used for the study to identify individual and group behaviors related to a series of choices (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997; Dunleavy, 1991). The value of education and recreational choices can be measured by an individual's behavior. As such, it is believed that rational individuals will attain what they need by the choices they make. The fundamental belief is that all actions taken are "rational" and that individuals will achieve what they want related to their greatest satisfaction. Key to the RC study are customer decisions linked to registering for recreation programs based on educational gains in addition to personal, social, and self-esteem improvements for the participant. Recreation professionals must conduct ongoing assessments to address customer needs. The desired result infuses new and inviting programs that influence current trends and educational interests.

3. Literature Review

The role of the park and recreation agency is vital to the local community because they provide leisure programming, leadership, and skill building activities. Barcelona and Young (2010) found positive results occurred when the local park and recreation agency offered a parent training program related to youth in sports. They learned that recreational professionals' involvement in coaching of the parents increased customer satisfaction and built a more positive environment.

Rosenberger, Bergerson and Kline (2009) determined that parks and recreation plays an important function when addressing health and wellness within a community. More directly, these programs include an outdoor adventure component with time spent in nature. It was also determined that parks and recreation programs should provide facilities for the community to "recreate" in and spend time to learn and develop friendships in a clean and friendly environment. As Murphy (2011) notes in an article comparing two Bay Area students in California, "some children have the chance to explore their interests and keep their minds sharp [in summer programs], while others do not...children from poor families are even less likely to experience those learning opportunities" (p. A1). Building on the educational theme, afterschool programming that involves multimedia projects or activities found attractive to teens can enhance educational opportunities that can lead to career interests (National Institute On Out-of-School Time, 2008).

Borodulin, Laatikainen, Lahti-Koski, Jousilahti, and Lakka (2008) studied the association between age, education and leisure-time and physical activity. They discovered that an individual's education level indicated a higher physical conditioning and increased time at a leisure activity than those at-risk and with a lower education level. These "at-risk" communities need outdoor parks and recreation programs to assist with obesity and poor health (Rosenberger, Bergerson & Kline, 2009). As a result they suggest that less educated populations be targeted to increase health, wellness and overall fitness. Building on this initiative, those with a lower income or less skilled tend to have increased health risk and fewer recreational activities in their daily lives (Salmon, Owen, Bauman, Schmitz, & Booth, 2000). Joassart-Marcelli (2009) determined that cities that were fiscally healthy allocated more resources to their parks and recreation departments, supporting the notion that US workers are meeting the "Healthy People 2010 Guidelines" as defined in a study by Caban-Martinez Lee et al. (2007).

4. Methods

The RC study was conducted in an East Bay Parks and Community Services Department, a middle class community of 60,000 located in Northern California. The program offers a full-scale program with 52 parks, three community centers, two aquatic centers, sports leagues, day camps, leisure enrichment classes, and co-sponsored gymnasium programs. A survey was developed to view the solidarity benefits of education and consumer participation in a municipal parks and recreation program. Rational choice theory was used to guide the study for the measurement of perceptions and satisfaction. Education defined for the study includes (1) the development and imagination of learning in humans as a means to reach a higher level and (2) knowledge gained by participating in math, science and technology programs.

The RC survey included five questions regarding customer choices and education and leisure program selection and seven demographic questions. The RC survey was emailed electronically to the agency's customers with an invitation to participate in the online survey via Survey Monkey during the summer of 2011. The survey was sent out to more than 24,000 participants in the City's database and more than 850 responses were received. Data Analysis was done using Minitab software and Microsoft Excel.

Participants. The participants in the RC survey were from the California Park and Recreation Society's (CPRS) District 3 and consisted of 35 municipal recreation agencies, including five special districts that span areas larger than a typical municipal boundary. Each agency was afforded the opportunity to participate in the RC study and based on the data received; responses would potentially produce valuable data that would assist in future programming efforts. Some agencies chose not to participate in this study, as it did not match the needs of the organization.

5. Results

More females than males responded to the survey (69%), and out of those, 72% indicated education gained is a contributing factor for the amount of money participants are willing to spend on a recreation program regardless of age, sex, and level of education (69%), decision makers (44%) and shared decision makers (54%). The responding participants were mostly female (69.6) and most had 1-2 children (50.3). A majority held a bachelor's degree (43.4) and were Caucasian (68.5) followed by Asian (16), Hispanic (4.2), Indian (3.7), other (3.3), Asian Pacific Islander (2.8), African-American (1.1) and Native American Indian (0.4) (see Table 1).

Results also showed that males are more willing to pay for an education based program (41%) and female are

more willing to pay for summer day camp program (59%). Quite interesting was that the higher the education (82%), the higher the percentage that answered *yes* to this question. For this study, the definition of higher education are those with at least Bachelor's degree (42%) and Master's or post graduate degree (39%). Out of those with higher education, those with no kids (37%) and with two kids under 18 said *yes* the most (35%).

Findings also suggest that regardless of the participant's sex (72% female), education level (42% Bachelor's degree, Master/post grad degree 39%), and age group (41–46, 22%, and 47–52, 20%), education gained is a contributing factor regarding the amount they are willing to spend on a recreation program (see Table 1). Regardless of their sex, most participants were not likely to pay for an education-based program related to math, science, technology but if they were willing to pay, these are the breakdowns: 41% male, age group 35–40 (50%), post graduate degree (46%), Asian (61%), Indian (55%), and those with 4 children under 18 yrs (89%).

Most participants did not indicate the amount they were willing to spend on a class (28%) and summer day camp program (43%). For a class, their first choice is less than \$50 for both men (21%) and women (26%). For summer camp, women's first choice is \$101–150 (13%) whereas for men it is a tie between less than \$50 (11%) and \$76–100 (11%). Those in the 41–46-age brackets were more willing to spend \$51–75 (29%), \$76–100 (25%), \$101–150 (30%), \$151–200 (38%) and \$200 (29%).

Table 1 Demographics

Sex	
Female	69.6
Male	60.4
Number of Children	
1–2	50.3
Education Level	
Bachelor's	43.4
Masters/post grad	37.5
Community College	14.8
High school graduate	4.1
Some high school	0.1
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	68.5
Asian	16.0
Hispanic/Latino	4.2
Indian	3.7
Other	3.3
Asian Pac Islander	2.8
Black	1.1
American Indian	0.4

6. Discussion

The findings from the RC were of interest and presented a path for future planning for leisure programs and services. Regardless of sex (57%) most participants did not specify the amount they are willing to spend on a summer day camp program (43%) and were not likely to pay for a program if it is educationally based (i.e., math,

science, and technology). More women were inclined to spend between \$101–150 (13%) and \$75–100 (12%) on a class but most did not indicate the amount that they would spend on a summer day camp for their child (41%). Contrary, ages 41–46 are more willing to spend money on summer day camp program — \$51–75 (29%), \$76–100 (25%), \$101–150 (30%), \$151–200 (38%) and \$200 (29%).

Another interesting finding was related to education gained and those with two kids under 18. When asked about spending money on a class for education, 22% are willing to spend under \$25, \$76 to \$100 (22%) and 22% did not state. This group also scored the highest percentage on willingness to spend money for summer camp and represented 48% of those willing to spend \$51–75, 44% of \$76–100, 50% of the \$101–150, and 57% of the \$151–200. The higher education group (Bachelor's degree and Master/post graduate degree) scored the highest percentage on willingness to spend money for summer camp and represented 79% of those willing to spend under \$50, 81% of \$51–75, 87% of \$76–100, 81% of the \$101–150, and 85% of the \$151–200, 90% of \$200.

A conclusion might be that women were more engaged in the recreational choices made for the family and that they are willing to pay for a program as long as it meets their immediate goal (i.e., child's wellbeing), instead of for math, science and technology. The strong indication of participating in a program with an education component was important and participants regardless of sex and were willing to drive farther to ensure the education needs of their children were met. This spoke to the value of education as a component of leisure and that it was an important factor when making a decision to participate. Clearly those that were familiar with the higher education environment had stronger feelings that education was important to the leisure program, resulting in greater survey scores of this group.

7. Limitations

Study limitations include a confined sample within one park and recreation agency and a population with a higher social-economic status than the other surrounding East Bay communities. Despite that, the findings still provide timely information for parks and recreation programming and can be used as a benchmark for progress and program development.

8. Conclusion

During the summer of 2011, the Recreation Choice (RC) study was conducted to measure customer preference related to leisure activities and education. The findings from the RC study show that educational gains are linked to customer deciding to enroll in a recreation program. The findings also provided valuable information to be used by recreation agencies to formulate leisure programs and services. In areas where customers have choices of where to purchase recreation programs, departments could specialize and cooperate in order to provide a great variety of programs and increase their potential customer base. In this time when most recreation programs need to be revenue neutral or designed to make money, collaborating with neighboring communities could result in better programs for more people and a stronger cash flow for each department.

Ultimately, the RC study identified the choices that enhance customer participation in a municipal parks and recreation program. As found by Crompton (2008), the importance of educational programs within a recreation setting, such as an afterschool program can be one the many valuable contributors to the local community. Education as a component for leisure is important and will enhance the local community. As found by Briand, Sauvé, and Frechette (2011), participation in individual, family/school and community recreation programs

contributes to the overall development of the community and creates valuable experiences for all involved. Future directions include surveying additional parks and recreation agencies that service areas with a more diverse social-economic population in the East Bay of California.

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