

Anatomy of the Academy: Dissecting the Past, Resecting the Future

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Offered the opportunity to write about whatever topic moves me, I decided my millennial issue is to examine the place of leisure studies in higher education. Having recently left the academy after putting in 15 years at three different universities (most recently, the University of Illinois), affords me certain liberty to explore my thoughts on the future of the field of leisure studies. Within each of my former institutions, I found myself struggling, along with my colleagues, to articulate a vision of leisure studies suited to that institution and the place of leisure studies within it. The challenge that consistently plagued us was trying to adapt our program to what I found to be very rigid, narrow, and antiquated accreditation standards while simultaneously strengthening our position on campus at a time when administrators were looking for programs to eliminate without harming the overall university.

To put it bluntly: National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) accreditation is not serving the academy well. I could use all of my precious space and more to detail my objections to it, but I want to leave some space to offer a positive vision of the field which might be the basis of reforms. Briefly then, leisure studies accreditation in the U.S. is based on a mid-20th century ethos inspired and perpetuated by those who were schooled in the "traditional practices" of a relatively few leisure service settings. The vision (if you can call it that) of the field implied by the existing accreditation model is tilted toward publically organized recreation program administration. As narrow as this model is, it nonetheless supports a large and confusing collage of standards dominated by the particular issues and practices of public recreation settings. Its complexity and incoherence reflect the inability of the various camps within NRPA, themselves structured around various service settings, to transcend their petty particulars and form a common vision that can inspire the field to lead and grow with the new millennium. This model has become increasingly irrelevant and unworkable as most academic programs have had to move away from it and toward such areas as commercial recreation, tourism, and sports management to attract students and remain viable.

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For research universities, such a vision does not hold up well as an academic subject matter worthy of departmental status. As an illustration, a provost of the University of Illinois defined relevance as the extent to which a program was central to the university. That put derivative fields such as leisure studies at a disadvantage. No American university can be without primary fields such as history, sociology, English, mathematics, or chemistry, but there are plenty of excellent universities that do without leisure studies. Few would argue to cut history and keep leisure studies no matter how dismal job prospects are in history. Thus, the relevance of a specialized, peripheral field is defined by the linkages it can forge with the traditional disciplines and core professions that make up higher education. We are relevant and central to the extent that other fields send students to learn from us. We are less relevant and less central to the extent we send our students to learn from others and/or replicate in some way the subject matter of other fields (i.e., marketing, administration, statistics, etc.). A vision for leisure studies in higher education ultimately should hinge not on employment sectors new and old, but its unique body of ideas. In my view leisure studies sorely lacks a vision of ideas that can grow and change as we move into the new millennium.

I am not arguing against accreditation per se, but I am arguing for a meaningful vision of the field that would serve higher education better than the vision currently lacking in NRPA accreditation. Thus, in an effort to spur visionary dialogue, I offer an *Incomplete Anatomical Diagram of Leisure Studies* (Figure 1). The diagram represents my initial attempt to circumscribe and dissect the realm we call leisure studies and locate it in the world external to the university (we should also try to locate our place within the bodies of knowledge that make up the university, but I will leave that to another time). Think of the diagram as describing an onion with four layers. I have attempted to position items in any given layer according to conceptual relatedness. We can use this common reference to argue over which pieces of anatomy to study and which to surrender to a neighboring academic village. We can also argue over the correct number of layers, missing structures, precise locations, and preferred names. Perhaps the diagram would become so lucid that we could agree on a single attractive, and highly descriptive name for our onion-field, but that might be expecting too much.

The diagram places at the center of the onion the conceptualization of the phenomenon that unites us (at Illinois we called it leisure behavior though some liked the phrase "expressive culture"). The outer surface represents the world of leisure, the clients we serve, and the institutions that structure leisure expression in society. The inside contains the knowledge and representations of the world we construct. The outside is the constantly changing and evolving world we seek to represent. As one moves in toward the center, knowledge becomes more abstract, theoretical, and enduring. As one moves outward knowledge becomes more descriptive and practical, but also less durable and generalizable.

The inner core constitutes, naturally, the philosophical and conceptual center of the field. It is the closest we come to articulating a discipline. Not

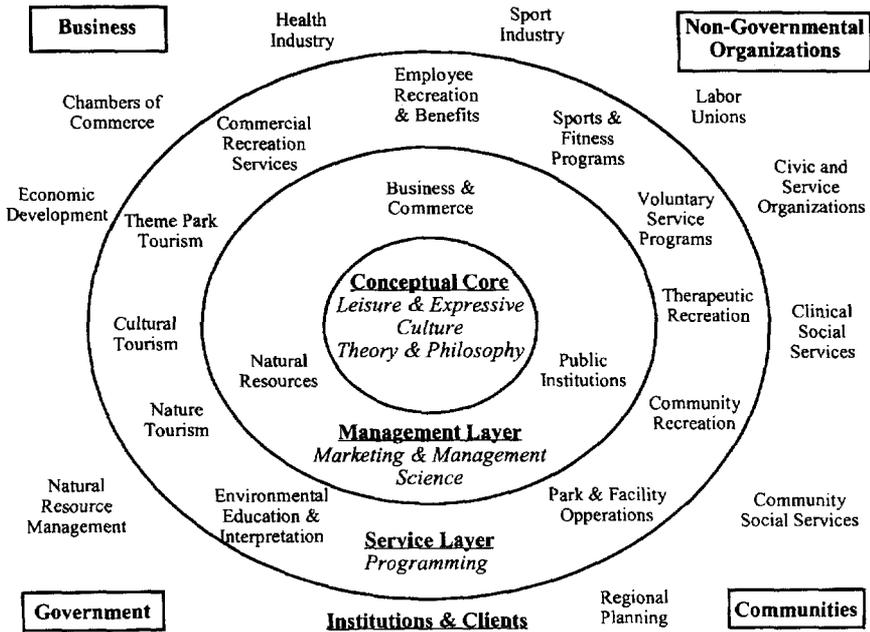


Figure 1. Incomplete anatomical diagram of leisure studies.

so much analogous to sociology or psychology, but more like communications or consumer behavior—an interdisciplinary subject matter that can be understood from a variety of social science disciplines. At this level we should embrace leisure, play, and expressive culture in all their manifestations and seek the kinds of understanding that disciplines seek (knowledge that is abstract, theoretical, and philosophical).

As one moves out from the conceptual core to the management layer, the emphasis shifts from theory and philosophy to administration and management sciences. Here we deal with the theoretical and applied knowledge that addresses not leisure itself, but the design and administration of leisure service delivery systems and the management of institutions that shape leisure expression. Application at this level is still fairly abstract and knowledge generalizes across fields of inquiry. That is we work more at an institutional/organizational level. While differences emerge across broad application areas (public versus private sector, social versus physical infrastructure) and levels of scales (individual/clinical, organizational/community, societal), there is much in common here (marketing, management, analytical techniques), both inside and outside of leisure studies.

Next comes the service/program layer. At this level, knowledge has to do with the strategies for influencing leisure behavior and the practices of the many and varied forms of leisure services organizations. Here we find

much of the inspiration for existing accreditation standards (albeit narrowly focused on a few areas). Knowledge is much more specific to the individual sector involved and far less transferable from one to another. Thus we have trouble fitting sports management or tourism into the accreditation standards because these areas were not prominent in the mid 20th century models of the field. In this layer, knowledge is more contextual and dynamic than the inner layers. Because this kind of knowledge changes as society changes, accreditation standards rigidly modeled on it can quickly become obsolete. Though some general principles probably apply to some sectors and groups for longer periods of time, it is dangerous to model the field on a limited number of sectors that happen to be prominent in any particular era.

Finally, beyond the borders of academia are the institutions, service sectors, and individual expressions of leisure that we seek to understand and represent in our models of the world. Here we encounter the dynamic and evolving real world to be modeled and the clientele for our knowledge. These organizations and institutions potentially nurture us with resources and students. They in turn look to us to help solve their problems through the development of new knowledge and bright, thoughtful, skilled, and motivated graduates. A key difference with the service layer is that much of what goes on is not highly organized into leisure service sectors. Moreover, knowledge of leisure must be placed within environmental, social, economic, and political contexts. In other words, the real world institutions do not necessarily see and address leisure as a separate concern, but as part of a larger societal context. Because we do little to understand leisure within the context of larger societal forces and trends, much of the knowledge of this arena has been left to neighboring academic fields. We have neglected macro-scale political and economic forces in favor of micro-scale understandings of service programming and administration.

In my judgment accreditation standards and academic programs build far too much on specific regions of the middle two layers and not nearly enough on the inner core and the outermost layer. The general accreditation standards are tied too much to the service layer (mostly understood as community based services). Rather than recognizing evolving knowledge areas, service arenas, and societal patterns and trends in leisure, the emphasis area standards for accreditation reify and reinforce a partial and outdated taxonomy of service settings. In recent decades more emphasis has been directed to the management layer (something of high value to society), but we offer very little that is unique to leisure studies in this layer. Our courses replicate those offered in business and organizational management. Emphasizing this area doesn't strengthen our position within the academy, it makes our contribution less distinguishable from other more established and valued fields.

Within the service layer there is at least more uniqueness of knowledge, but this knowledge tends to be context specific and ephemeral. As tastes change, service industries, whether public or private, must adapt. Tourism and sports management are good examples of growing arenas for applying

service management and programming, but what will the next millennium bring and how will we prepare for it? A vision of the field riveted to past service settings does not make much room for the new. Leisure services need to be understood as more than programming organized recreation. Seeing the service layer as an ever-changing array would allow our vision of the field to both reflect and evolve with the times. Standards would not reify individual service sectors, but provide a framework within which academic programs could find and refine their particular niche in this dynamic layer. A vision of leisure studies cannot be built and evolve by simply applying classic programming to the latest leisure fashion.

The significance of the last layer is that the field actively monitors leisure style and fashion and the institutional dimensions which structure leisure. We need to be constantly dissecting this outside layer. Where the conceptual core seeks the essence of leisure, the outermost layer reflects our understanding of leisure's evolving forms and expressions. Like the service layer, the outer regions will evolve and change with the times. Our vision of the field needs the flexibility to incorporate these changes. In fact the academic task here is to monitor, anticipate, and perhaps even evaluate these expressions and understand something of the larger in social processes affecting regions in this layer. By this I mean leisure related understanding must be connected and integrated with other environmental, social, economic, and political processes which constitute society.

With this onion-model as a guide, we can begin to examine how to organize academic curricula. Departments and programs might specialize in a subset of layers, regions, or cones of the onion. Similarly, students could be offered specializations in selected regions of the management and service layers and associated institutions and expressions in outer layer, as well as specializations in specific layers. They should probably be well-versed in the conceptual core, have a broad grasp of the outer realm that is leisure, and recognize that it is an evolving realm which the conceptual core helps them to map for themselves over time. Accreditation standards should allow programs to be flexible and creative in how they locate themselves within the onion-framework to suit their particular institutional contexts. General program standards should recognize the changing content of individual layers and allow programs more latitude for defining and organizing programs around various regions or cones.

Just as it is dangerous to have a static vision of the field, the lack of real vision also causes us to be overly opportunistic in linking relevance to whatever constitutes the social agenda of the day. With the best of intentions we offer up a program to respond to that agenda (midnight basketball for youth at risk). We are too quick to claim that we can solve any social problem by targeting it with a leisure program. Our tendency to talk only about the positive efficacy of leisure reflects a preference for thinking of leisure as a compensatory remedy for social problems. We emphasize how programs, services, and interventions can change individual lives or functioning ("The benefits are endless"). Certainly this is the model of therapeutic recreation,

but it also permeates much of the programmatic emphasis typical of education-based and health-based leisure studies curricula. It is a view that reached its zenith in the mid 20th century and forms the ideological backdrop of the accreditation movement in leisure studies.

Collectively the various leisure studies programs in American higher education send mixed signals to university administrators, academic colleagues in neighboring fields, and other constituencies because we try to be all things to all interests. Our departmental names drift with the times, adding and subtracting service sectors. We adjust our message and program offerings to the latest poll results. The uncertainties within higher education do not help matters. Are we expected by administrators to justify ourselves on undergraduate enrollments, employment sector possibilities, or the status of the "profession"? To put it slightly differently, is our continued presence in higher education predicated on our ability to generate a market for a baccalaureate degree wedded to a 20th century model of the field? Or is it based on staking out a reasonably clear, unclaimed piece of the academic landscape and elevating the understanding, value, and centrality of that territory within higher education? We in the academy must survive in the academy. Our vision for leisure studies in the new millennium should come not from those outside the academy looking in, but from those inside the academy looking out.