Parks and Recreation Management Program
Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation
College of Education and Allied Professions
Western Carolina University

External Review Report

Submitted By:

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Introduction

The Parks and Recreation Management (PRM) Program review occurred from Sunday, January 30 through Tuesday, February 1, 2011. Preparations for the visit were coordinated by the Office for Planning and Effectiveness (David Onder & Pam Buchanan). Prior to its visit the Review Team received paper and electronic copies of the PRM Program’s self study and had access to the University’s website for additional documents.

The campus visit was well-organized and the schedule of meetings and related activities provided for an efficient and intensive review. Following a campus orientation (tour) and a dinner on WCU’s campus, the Review Team shared its initial impressions of the self-study and identified questions and issues that would guide its meetings with various representatives. The schedule included meetings with Dr. David Claxton, Department Head, Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, Dr. Perry Schoon, Dean of the College of Education and Applied Professions, and Dr. Linda Stanford, Interim Provost of the University. The schedule provided opportunities for a tour of facilities, discussions with the PRM faculty both formally and informally, as well as a luncheon with students and alumni of the program. The exit meeting on Tuesday was used to summarize the Team’s overall findings and its preliminary recommendations, which are presented in the remainder of the report. This report is presented in three parts: (1) Analysis of Program, (2) PRM Program Areas for Improvement, and (3) Recommendations

1. Analysis of Program

1.1 General Impression of the PRM Program

Overall, the External Review Team was very impressed with all aspects of the PRM Program at WCU. The program is well managed by a team of highly qualified and dedicated faculty. In addition, the PRM program relies effectively on highly qualified adjunct faculty to deliver skills and some classroom based courses. In general, the PRM program provides a nurturing and caring learning environment that is both student-centered and experientially based. The program is respected and highly regarded by the University community at all levels including administration, faculty, students, and alumni. The External Review Team concurs with this assessment.

WCU is located in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina and is in close proximity to over 10 rivers, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Nantahala, Sumter, and
Chattahoochee National Forests, and Ellicot Rock Wilderness Area. This location is a major asset for the PRM program providing abundant natural resources for teaching and for PRM students to develop and enhance their outdoor skills in a variety of water and land based activities. The region also provides excellent internship opportunities, including national and state parks, national forests, camps, resorts, and various tourism and outdoor recreation related businesses.

1.2 Summary of Program Strengths

1.2.1 Faculty:
- Dedicated and committed, highly respected by students
- Faculty has a long and distinguished history with current program
- Adjunct faculty are highly qualified and dedicated
- Faculty take a leadership role in University initiatives (e.g., QEP)
- Faculty interact with and are accessible to students
- Faculty are connected to other academic programs as well as national, regional, and local park and recreation professionals
- Faculty are role models to their students
- Faculty provide career counseling as well as academic counseling
- Adjunct faculty provide real world experiences and examples
- Long term commitment to programmatic improvement

1.2.2 Collaboration:
- Informal collaboration with campus resources related to outdoor, environmental, and park resources (e.g., Base Camp Cullowhee, Student Affairs)
- Provide outdoor leadership and experiential expertise for University and Department leadership development workshops
- Collaboration with regional and national organizations (e.g., national parks and forests)
- Student Park and Recreation Management Club’s membership is open to all students across WCU Campus

1.2.3 Curriculum:
- Curriculum is focused and aligned with regional economic development plan and local natural resources.
- Program has the potential for growth.
- Program retains and graduates a high number of students.
- Western Carolina University’s location is ideal for the nature of this academic program.
- Program attracts regional, national, and international students.
- Site visit interviews of WCU leadership indicate that the program is a high priority for WCU.
- Program initiated admission policy by raising GPA to 2.5, requiring essay, and strategic academic plan.
- Solid core curriculum that allows for development of student selected career paths and interests.
- Students graduate with experience and are prepared to work.
• Students develop a holistic view of their profession regardless of their concentration.
• Articulation agreement for students completing associate degrees at Southwestern Community College.
• Students cited having three concentrations as a strength of the program (resource recreation management, outdoor leadership, and community).
• Exceptional opportunities exist for relevant intermediary and capstone internships relevant to the curriculum.
• Curriculum facilitates the development of a cohesive student cohort that maintains connections through their education and beyond graduation.
• Curriculum teaches applied theory which leads to synthesis and engaged application.
• Advising is of high quality and focused on student abilities and desired outcomes.
• Curriculum marries traditional academic learning with experiential learning opportunities.
• Students can receive professional certifications in multiple areas (American Canoe Association, Wilderness First Responder, National Ski Patrol Outdoor Emergency Care, Rescue III/Swift Water Rescue, etc.).

1.2.4 Assessment:
• Recognized annual assessment process and plan.
• Comprehensive learning outcome measurement through a professional knowledge examination administered to all seniors. Students must pass the comprehensive exam to graduate.
• Qualitative assessment of internship outcomes through student reflection projects.
• Student portfolios include artifacts of major professional and learning outcomes in professional development (resume and cover letter), risk management plan, program planning, program evaluation, leadership analysis, and business planning.

1.2.5 Program Resources and Management:
• Reid gym is centrally located and Program has adequate storage areas for equipment and supplies.
• Adequate equipment for water based and land based educational programs and activities.
• Regional natural resources are exceptional for conducting all phases and aspects of the Program.
• Campus resources are adequately used in the Program.
• The Program is well and continuously managed,
• Program faculty have identified, recruited, secured, and retained relevant and highly skilled and specialized adjunct faculty to assure program implementation.
2. PRM Program Areas for Improvement:

PRM faculty do an excellent job of delivering their program by creating opportunities for faculty and students to interact with one another, encouraging cooperative learning among students, using experiential or active learning to deliver course work, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and learning styles. PRM faculty teach a full compliment of courses and spend a large amount of time mentoring, advising, and meeting with students, all to their credit. The use of adjunct instructors provides flexibility to the faculty and provides additional teaching resources to teach specific courses on an as-need basis. The review team feels that there are areas where PRM has opportunities for improvement. These areas are presented below.

2.1 Faculty:
- The Program is limited by a lack of sufficient fulltime faculty members with appropriate degree qualifications in parks, recreation, and management needed to receive national accreditation and to maintain high academic and industry standards.
- The seniority of the full-time faculty can be seen as a weakness when coupled with the lack of a succession plan for the program.
- Adjunct faculty have specialized skills but may lack appropriate degree credentials for national accreditation standards.

2.2 Curriculum:
- Lack of national accreditation.
- Too many formal degree concentrations included in curriculum that could be addressed through guided electives.
- Mission statement currently does not highlight the strengths and attributes of the program and region. The mission statement could also be more in line with the University mission and vision.
- Experiential curriculum needs to be balanced with greater academic rigor to meet evolving academic standards of the industry and student-expressed-desires for advanced studies.
- Lack of course offerings in research methods, statistics, and a legal issues course.
- Students need to complete more science courses.
- There are a number of courses not taught regularly due to lack of sufficient faculty resources.
- Students do not use university liability insurance for capstone internships.
- The resource recreation management concentration lacks structure and specific course requirements.
- Students indicated the reputation of the academic rigor of the Program is not as high as they would prefer.
- Outdoor Emergency Care first aid is not the industry standard.

2.3 Program Resources and Management:
- Lack of Program budget for systematic, programmatic improvement, equipment maintenance and long-range planning.
• Program lacks quantitative data on student concentrations, alumni, employment, etc.
• Program is weak on articulating accomplishments, strengths and contributions to the University at the departmental, college, and university level
• Program lacks a marketing plan for attracting high quality students from the region and nation is lacking.
• Program lacks a formalized alumni and advisory committee.
• Program lacks a designated lab area space at Reid Gym

3. Recommendations

The Review Team is very impressed with the PRM program especially in terms of its student centered and experiential based learning approach. During the exit meeting the Review Team characterized the PRM Program as a “model” for WCU, especially because of the University’s physical location and the many outdoor resources available for student learning. The following summary of recommended actions is offered for consideration.

3.1 Faculty
• Hire one tenure track faculty to facilitate transition, teach required courses, and pursue NRPA Accreditation.

3.2. Curriculum Development and Program “Niche”
• Revise PRM mission statement to align with University mission and vision, reflect the strengths and unique attributes of the program (i.e., outdoor leadership and recreation resource management), the QEP, and the resources of the region.
• Access NRPA Accreditation Standards and begin aligning the Program and all course syllabi with the NRPA 8.0 Professional Competency Standards (see NRPA 2013 Accreditation Standards.
• Revise current curriculum and remove formal concentrations.
• Expand the core curriculum and use guided electives to emphasize outdoor recreation leadership and recreation resource management (Note: this does not eliminate the possibility of a student using guided electives to pursue studies relevant to community recreation and commercial and resort recreation).
• Establish formal memorandums of agreement with Student Affairs to share climbing wall and Base Camp Cullowhee resources.
• Create a formal advisory committee composed of alumni and local professionals in the industry to review current and future curriculum.
• Advise students to complete Math 170 - Applied Statistics as a LS math requirement and begin scheduling PRM 360 - Recreation Research.
• Review and increase the science requirements to 3 courses with at least 2 of the three courses in environmental biology, natural resource management, environmental health, or other appropriate area.
• Advertise relevant PRM courses to encourage across campus enrollments to increase SCH (e.g., a course such as PRM 434 High Adventure Travel and outfitting could attract at least 40 students per semester).
• Partner with Southwest Community College to provide Wilderness First Responder (WFR) course or see qualification of one faculty member to teach the WFR course. (Note: the existing course PRM 356 Outdoor First Aid could be revised to cover WFR content.)
• Require students participating in the capstone internship to purchase University liability insurance.

3.3. Program Resources and Management
• The Department should annually appropriate a specific portion of funding to the PRM program based on student enrollment so that PRM Faculty may complete an annual budget and long range planning process for the acquisition of supplies, equipment, and for equipment maintenance.
• Both full time PRM Faculty will be eligible for retirement in the next two to five years. It is essential for the future stability of this viable and growing academic program that another full-time faculty member be hired to facilitate the transition.
• Develop an internal monitoring and data collection process for student learning outcomes, alumni employment, retention, and graduation rates and report these metrics in the Program’s Annual Assessment Report.
• Develop a one-page internal Program Profile that is updated annually with accomplishments, strengths, program orientation, and distribute across campus and regionally. This should include student and alumni profiles and stories from the Program’s current newsletter “Tent Peg.”
• Continue to pursue external funding opportunities for demonstration, expansion, and equipment acquisition.
• Update Program Website to emphasize outdoor leadership and resource recreation management.
• Require electronic portfolios with student reflections on artifacts and personalized information such as internship projects and personal experience photos.

CONCLUSION

The reviewers found the PRM program is committed to providing students with a thoughtful, relevant, and attentive program. The PRM program is a highly regarded professional program and reflects the real working world of park and recreation professionals. This is achieved through a dynamic and student centered curriculum. There is a respected and highly qualified faculty and staff team in place, which has effective relationships with students, administrators and staff, and a culture dedicated to encouraging students to critically self-assess both in the classroom and field.

The reviewers would like to thank WCU for their warm welcome and support during the review. Everyone was open and honest with his or her thoughts and suggestions. It was a pleasure spending time with them.