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Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires by Campus Recreation Directors

Robert C. Schneider, William F. Stier Jr., Stephen Kampf, Scott G. Haines, and Gregory Wilding

Professionals and students working in college recreation departments are often involved in many facets relating to the hiring of competent employees. A review of literature revealed that various professions sought different qualities in potential job candidates. There were few examples of research relating to the qualities sought by potential employers of campus recreation personnel. Therefore, recreation directors, holding a NIRSA institutional membership, were surveyed to determine the characteristics, attributes, and competencies preferred in new hires for: (a) professional positions, (b) graduate assistantships, and (c) student employees. The findings revealed the most highly sought after qualifications in professional job candidates were excellent language/speaking skills, prior experience in campus recreation, neat overall appearance, excellent writing skills, and possession of a graduate degree. In terms of graduate assistant positions, campus recreation directors highly ranked the categories neat overall appearance, excellent writing skills, and prior experience in campus recreation. Campus recreation directors ranked the possession of certifications in first aid and CPR highly among student employee applicants.

Key Words: hiring, college, job candidates, student employees, professional positions

In today's competitive job market, it is necessary for prospective employees in the field of campus recreation to gain every advantage possible to obtain employment. In order to gain advantages, new college graduates must be aware of what potential employers are looking for in job applicants. In addition, academic professional preparation programs might place a higher curricular emphasis on those skills that campus recreation directors seek in new hires.

The opportunities for jobs in the collegiate recreation market have become increasingly competitive over the past years. This increase in demand for jobs in campus recreation has resulted in a more intense and complex search and screening

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process—one that requires campus recreation directors to have a clear understanding of the characteristics, attributes, and competencies they expect from prospective employees.

The interview continues to be the most widely accepted form of evaluating prospective employees. A person being interviewed for a job needs to make positive impressions during the interview process. Positive impressions can occur through positive verbal and non-verbal communications, interviewee qualifications, and the ability of the prospective job candidate to effectively communicate his or her past accomplishments. Professional experience, related work experience, and communication skills were the most sought after qualifications in a job candidate (Ross & Blackman, 2004).

Keizer (1997) cited recreational services as an example of a non-academic area that should be consumer friendly and provide patrons with their money's worth. Keizer further stated that administrators take a more business-minded approach to their decision-making process. In order that campus recreation programs are successful, directors must be able to effectively identify and hire quality employees.

Related Literature

General Expectations of Various Employees

As one might expect, there were numerous examples of professional literature dealing with attributes and competencies of personnel. Messmer (1998) contended that the personalities and working styles of those applying for jobs are usually considered important when deciding on successful candidates for professional positions requiring an MBA degree. Horowitz (1999) generally ranked positive attitude at the top of desired characteristics in employees. Applicants who focused more on being pleasant, agreeable, and offering compliments to interviewers were deemed better fits to their prospective jobs than applicants who focused more on their credentials for the job (Higgins & Judge, 2004). Troiano (2004) stated that professionalism, pleasantness, enthusiasm, courtesy, and believability are highly rated attributes sought when conducting phone interviews for prospective job candidates.

The number one proficiency sought by employers of new college graduates is communication skills (The National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2005). The ability to write and to speak effectively are actions that have long been identified as skills needed in employees. However, employers of new college graduates have not seen an improvement in these areas from among their job candidates (NACE).

Various Expectations for Different Professions

A study conducted by Arnold et al. (1998) examined various employment settings of athletic trainers, and found that when hiring employees, experience was valued as well as holding degrees from different institutions. The following competency areas were found by Barcelona (2004) to be more important for upper-level administrators: communication/public relations, management techniques, business procedures, legality/risk management, computer skills, facilities/equipment management, and research/evaluation. Barcelona also found that substantial differences existed in the

general body of knowledge necessary for upper-level and entry-level recreational sport managers. Recreational sport programming, philosophy, and sport science were found to be more important for entry-level sport programmers than for upper-level sport administrators.

Upper-level sport administrators need to be more prepared in areas related to business administration, technology, research, evaluation, and various other types of management such as personnel, risk, facilities, and equipment. Furthermore, and interesting to note, is that entry-level competencies should be covered within undergraduate recreation or sport management curricula, while upper-level administrative competencies should be covered within graduate curricula or professional training programs (Barcelona, 2004).

Longsdorf (2004), in a survey of parks and recreation professionals, found that potential employers in this field valued an employee who had strong communication skills. This was closely followed by the need for employees who understand administrative and management concepts, along with the basic techniques of budgeting, finance, and fiscal accountability. Ross and Blackman (1998), in a study of interview preferences, found professional experience to be the most important qualification in a job candidate. This was followed closely by the candidate's ability to communicate effectively and having other work experiences related to the job.

The master's degree, according to Barcelona (2004), is generally required for entry-level positions in campus recreation with 86.6% of campus recreation employees holding one. Young and Ross (2004) emphasized the importance of practicum and/or internship opportunities during time spent in undergraduate and graduate work. Internship and practicum experiences provide students with the opportunity to observe professionals in the workplace and gain knowledge through hands-on experience.

In a study that examined the influence of visual appearance on the employment of physical education teachers, Melville and Cardinal (1997) found that overweight job applicants were at a disadvantage. Melville and Cardinal expressed their opinion that faculty have a duty to inform their students that being overweight may make them less employable. A related study on interview practices and preferences, conducted by Ross and Blackman (2004), indicated that 64% of the respondents believed interviewees should dress nicer than expected if they wanted to be employed.

Professional Involvement

Young and Ross (2004) emphasized the need for professionals in recreational sports to stay current in their particular area of expertise. This could be accomplished through participation in a professional organization. Professional organizations such as the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) provide professionals the opportunities to share ideas, learn through conference attendance, and keep up-to-date on industry standards. In addition, NIRSA and NRPA provide their members the opportunity to obtain a professional certification. These certifications serve as an avenue for members to verify, practice, and maintain their professional skills.

The NRPA offers members the opportunity to gain certification as a Certified Parks and Recreation Professional (CPRP) and NIRSA previously offered its members the Certified Recreational Sports Specialist (CRSS) certification. Current research is

limited as to whether these certifications are being widely accepted throughout the recreation profession. In a study of employment competencies in public parks and recreation, Longsdorf (2004) found that 48% of those surveyed required or preferred their job candidates to hold a CPRP certification. Mowery (2000) conducted a study of senior student affairs professionals to ascertain their knowledge of campus recreation and intramural sports personnel. It was found that only 16% of those surveyed were aware of the existence of the CRSS certification.

Education and Hiring Preferences

The value of a high grade point average in the search process for recent college graduates varies depending on the type of job one is seeking. Henderson (1997), in a study on teaching assistants (TAs) in the area of mathematics, found that academic departments selected employees more for their scholastic ability than on their ability to teach. Furthermore, it was found that TAs will learn the practical skills needed to teach and conduct research from faculty members. Thus, in the job search process, candidates with high GPAs have an advantage over those who do not.

In an annual survey of potential employers of college graduates, the NACE (2005) found that a new graduate's GPA was not among the candidate qualities/skills that were ranked high. The GPA was given a score of 3.5 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 = *not at all important* and 5 = *extremely important*). On a list of 20 important qualities/skills sought by employers looking for in college graduates, GPA was ranked 18th.

Grades received in college serve as a representation of a person's intelligence. In addition, good grades could be indicative of a person who is disciplined and has good work habits. Employers should look for a well rounded candidate with good grades and a demonstration of working a job for a reasonable period of time. It is generally assumed that if a person can maintain good grades and hold down a job for a reasonable period of time, they can handle pressure and will find it easier to adjust to a new workplace (Morgan & Smith, 1996).

There is a difference between a candidate's training and education. Training usually involves the hands-on learning of a skill and is typically achieved through a job orientation or specific training sessions held by an organization. On the other hand, the education of a candidate reflects their intelligence and primarily tests their aptitude. A GPA can provide an indication of a student's achievement level within an educational setting. However, caution should be exercised, because the value of a college GPA varies from one school to another. An overall GPA of 3.5 at one institution might be equivalent to a 2.8 at another. Thus, trying to use an applicant's GPA in the hiring process might be somewhat misleading. It has generally been accepted that outstanding grades do not necessarily mean a job applicant will excel in their job performance (Arthur, 1998).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics, attributes, and competencies sought in new hires by campus recreation directors relative to the following three entry-level positions: (a) professional positions, (b) graduate assistantships, and (c) student employees. All campus recreation directors in the United States and Canada holding an institutional membership in NIRSA were surveyed.

Methodology

Questionnaire items were drawn from current literature as well as the researchers' knowledge and expertise in hiring campus recreation employees. For the purpose of seeking feedback related to the substance of the questions and to help validate the instrument, the questionnaire was mailed to five experts in the field of collegiate campus recreation. The experts were members of NIRSA who had held the position of campus recreation director for at least 10 years. After modifying the questionnaire based on their feedback, the researcher mailed the questionnaire to all campus recreation directors at the 560 colleges or universities that were institutional members of NIRSA. Cronbach's alpha was used on the final iteration of the questionnaire and the coefficient of reliability was found to be 0.935.

Along with the questionnaire, a cover letter that provided instructions on how to complete the questionnaire was included in the mailing. Also, the cover letter contained a statement making it clear that participation in the study was optional and the respondents could, at any time, remove themselves from the study by declining to complete and return the questionnaire. For those choosing to participate, the process was one of anonymity in that their identity and their institution's name were not revealed.

The 18 item questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale with 1 = irrelevant, 2 = not very important, 3 = important, 4 = very important, and 5 = essential. Directors were instructed to circle the number that most accurately depicted their view concerning the characteristics, attributes, and competencies sought by campus recreation directors in the hiring of professional positions, graduate assistants, and student employees.

A self-addressed, stamped envelope was provided for return of the completed questionnaire. Of the 560 questionnaires mailed, 241 were returned, a response rate of 43%.

Results

This study was devised to examine the characteristics, attributes, and competencies sought in new hires by campus recreation directors in the categories of professional employee, graduate assistant, and student employee. An analysis using SPSS software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL) was performed to evaluate the mean and standard deviations of questions relating to the demographics of the respondents and the 18 characteristics, attributes, and competencies.

Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Professional Employees

Table 1 represents the responses made by campus recreation directors relevant to characteristics, attributes, and competencies sought in the hiring of professional positions. The qualification for a professional position that had the highest mean score was excellent language/speaking skills (4.38, $SD = 0.631$), followed closely by prior experience in campus recreation (4.33, $SD = 0.745$), a neat overall appearance (4.29, $SD = 0.715$), excellent writing skills (4.24, $SD = 0.608$), and a graduate degree (4.10, $SD = 0.931$). Overall, the aforementioned top five ranking

Table 1 Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Professional Position

Characteristic, attribute, and competency	Mean	SD
Excellent language/speaking skills	4.38	0.631
Prior experience in campus recreation	4.33	0.745
Neat overall appearance	4.29	0.715
Excellent writing skills	4.24	0.608
Possession of graduate degree	4.10	0.931
Professionally dressed	3.94	0.828
CPR certification	3.74	1.147
Membership in a professional organization following graduation	3.69	0.980
Experience as a college student in leadership positions	3.69	0.915
First aid certification	3.63	1.148
Attendance at professional conferences	3.52	1.095
Prior participation in professional workshops	3.39	0.995
Current NIRSA membership	3.39	1.147
Experience as a college student in volunteer activities	3.03	1.052
Physically fit (fitness)	2.93	0.915
GPA of 3.0 or above as an undergraduate	2.50	1.061
Member of professional organization (such as NIRSA) as an undergraduate student	2.46	1.224
CRSS certification	2.35	1.152

characteristics, attributes, and competencies were viewed as being very important to essential for professional job candidates.

The three characteristics, attributes, and competencies that had the lowest mean scores in the professional position category were CRSS certification (2.35, $SD = 1.152$), membership in a professional organization (such as NIRSA) as an undergraduate (2.46, $SD = 1.224$), and a GPA of 3.0 or higher as an undergraduate (2.50, $SD = 1.061$). All three of the lowest ranking characteristics, attributes, and competencies were ranked by the respondents, on average, to be between not very important and important for professional job candidates.

Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Graduate Assistants

Table 2 illustrates the characteristics, attributes, and competencies sought by campus recreation directors in graduate assistant hires. The respondents indicated that a neat overall appearance was slightly more than very important (4.10, $SD = 0.764$) and was found to be the most highly ranked characteristic, attribute, and competency for a graduate assistant. The respondents also viewed excellent language/speaking skills as very important (3.99, $SD = 0.741$) and found that it

Table 2 Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Graduate Assistants

Characteristic, attribute, and competency	Mean	SD
Neat overall appearance	4.10	0.764
Excellent language/speaking skills	3.99	0.741
Excellent writing skills	3.72	0.740
Prior experience in campus recreation	3.65	0.998
CPR certification	3.64	1.182
Professionally dressed	3.61	0.832
Experience as a college student in leadership positions	3.55	0.931
First aid certification	3.50	1.207
Membership in a professional organization following graduation	2.97	1.148
GPA of 3.0 or above as an undergraduate	2.96	1.121
Physically fit (fitness)	2.90	0.915
Experience as a college student in volunteer activities	2.87	1.021
Attendance at professional conferences	2.68	1.036
Current NIRSA membership	2.59	1.199
Prior participation in professional workshops	2.55	0.963
Member of professional organization (such as NIRSA) as an undergraduate student	2.20	1.090
Possession of graduate degree	2.15	1.187
CRSS certification	1.58	0.793

was between very important and important (3.72, $SD = 0.740$) for a candidate to have excellent writing skills.

The respondents reported that the lowest ranked characteristic, attribute, and competency for a graduate assistant position was CRSS certification (1.58, $SD = 0.793$). This would indicate that directors ranked CRSS certification between not very important and irrelevant as a characteristic, attribute, or competency to possess in order to be considered for a graduate assistantship position in campus recreation. Being a member of a professional organization (such as NIRSA) as an undergraduate (2.20, $SD = 1.090$) and possessing a graduate degree (2.15, $SD = 1.187$) were also found to be low ranked, scoring between irrelevant and not very important for the graduate assistantship candidates.

Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Student Employees

Displayed in Table 3 are the characteristics, attributes, and competencies that campus recreation directors ranked when considering student employee hires. The category neat overall appearance had the highest mean (3.73, $SD = 0.866$), followed by excellent language/speaking skills (3.47, $SD = 0.745$), certification in

Table 3 Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Sought in New Hires of Student Employees

Characteristic, attribute, and competency	Mean	SD
Neat overall appearance	3.73	0.866
Excellent language/speaking skills	3.47	0.745
CPR certification	3.24	1.419
First aid certification	3.04	1.379
Professionally dressed	3.01	0.819
Excellent writing skills	2.93	0.743
Physically fit (fitness)	2.65	0.886
Experience as a college student in leadership positions	2.56	1.086
Experience as a college student in volunteer activities	2.34	1.048
GPA of 3.0 or above as an undergraduate	1.99	0.981
Prior experience in campus recreation	1.88	0.964
Membership in a professional organization following graduation	1.76	1.142
Prior participation in professional workshops	1.53	0.763
Attendance at professional conferences	1.47	0.794
Member of professional organization (such as NIRSA) as an undergraduate student	1.34	0.631
Current NIRSA membership	1.29	0.619
Possession of graduate degree	1.25	0.550
CRSS certification	1.15	0.480

CPR (3.24, $SD = 1.419$) and first aid certification (3.04, $SD = 1.379$). Overall, the aforementioned top three were ranked as being important to very important for student employee positions.

The lowest mean score rankings for student employees were CRSS certification (1.15, $SD = 0.48$), a graduate degree (1.25, $SD = 0.55$), and a current NIRSA membership (1.29, $SD = 0.619$). The above three were generally perceived to be irrelevant characteristics, attributes, and competencies when considering the hiring of student employees.

Comparison of Professional, Graduate Assistants, and Student Employee Positions

Table 4 represents the top five responses relevant to professional positions, graduate assistantships, and student employees. The top five characteristics, competencies, and attributes were ranked by the directors as very important to essential for candidates seeking professional positions. Mean scores for graduate assistants and student employees were progressively lower when compared to professional positions. Overall, there is a need for all job applicants in campus recreation to possess excellent language/speaking skills.

Table 4 Top Five Responses of Characteristics, Attributes, and Competencies Relating to Professional Positions, Graduate Assistantships, and Student Employees

Professional Position	Mean Score	Graduate Assistantships	Mean Score	Student Employees	Mean Score
Excellent language/speaking skills	4.38	Neat overall appearance	4.10	Neat overall appearance	3.73
Prior experience in campus recreation	4.33	Excellent language/speaking skills	3.99	Excellent language/speaking skills	3.47
Neat overall appearance	4.29	Excellent writing skills	3.72	CPR certification	3.24
Excellent writing skills	4.24	Prior experience in campus recreation	3.65	First aid certification	3.04
Possession of graduate degree	4.10	CPR certification	3.64	Professionally dressed	3.01

There is an apparent commonality in the campus recreation directors' top mean scores for professional and graduate assistant positions. Specifically, the top four responses are the same, but in different order of importance. Conversely, only the top two responses for student employees are similar to professional and graduate assistant positions. There is a need for potential student employees to possess certification in first aid and CPR because student employees are often placed on the front line in many positions within campus recreation. That is, they are responsible for opening/closing buildings, overseeing facilities, and coordinating programs.

Discussion

Professional Employees

Campus recreation directors surveyed in this study identified the need for new hires of professional positions to have excellent language/speaking and writing skills. This finding is consistent with earlier studies that found communication skills to be a highly sought after attribute in potential job candidates (Longsdorf, 2004; NACE, 2005). In addition, the findings at least support the importance of a job candidate's resume and interviewing skills. Typically, the primary way to assess job applicants is through resume review and an in-person interview. Assessing a job applicant's resume is the first opportunity the potential employer has to critique the applicant's skill in written communication. The interview provides the employer the initial experience to assess the candidate's language/speaking skills.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of gaining experience in campus recreation for young professionals in this field. Individuals wishing to gain a full-time professional position in college campus recreation should take every advantage in gaining experience in the many facets of a college campus recreation program. These findings mirror earlier studies that reported that employers place a high emphasis on prior experience in similar positions when choosing new employees (Arnold et al., 1998; Ross & Blackman, 2004).

Our findings also suggest that the campus recreation directors placed a lower importance, on average, on a candidate's GPA when considering that candidate for a professional position in campus recreation. Similarly, they rated NIRSA's CRSS certification at a lower level of importance for hiring professional positions, on average, than the other characteristics, attributes, and competencies considered by this study.

Graduate Assistantship

The most highly ranked characteristic by the directors of candidates for graduate assistantships was a neat overall appearance. Similar to earlier studies (Melville & Cardinal, 1997; Ross & Blackman, 2004), these findings further point to the need for potential graduate assistants to make sure they are prepared for their first impression on a potential employer.

There is an apparent difference in the qualifications sought in graduate assistants and teaching assistants in higher education. Campus recreation directors viewed the graduate assistant candidate's GPA as being important. However, they ranked nine other characteristics, attributes, and competencies as more important than a candidate's GPA. Henderson (1997) conducted a study that showed a candidate's GPA was a highly sought after qualification in the hiring of teaching assistants. In contrast to Henderson, this investigation found that most campus recreation directors would consider hiring candidates for graduate assistant positions based on their past experience and their ability to communicate effectively.

Student Employees

The findings of this study revealed that it is important for students to represent themselves in a positive manner when interviewing for a job, which can be accomplished by having a neat overall appearance. This finding supports earlier studies that identified the need for job candidates to exude a positive appearance during the interview process (Melville & Cardinal, 1997; Ross & Blackman, 2004). This information should be carefully considered by college students wishing to become employees within a college recreation department. A neat overall appearance means that a student should appear at an interview well groomed, dressed appropriately (wearing clothes that are neatly pressed), and wearing proper footwear.

Potential student employees should recognize the need to have appropriate certifications for the field of employment they are pursuing. First aid and CPR certification have become an industry standard (American College of Sports Medicine [ACSM], 1997) for many positions found in college recreation programs (life guard, personal trainer, aerobics instructor, and others). Thus, campus recreation directors ranked first aid and CPR very highly among the characteristics, attributes, and com-

petencies that student employees should possess to be considered for employment. This study reveals the importance of professional job candidates to possess excellent language and speaking skills. In addition, potential student employees who wish to be hired by campus recreation directors need to possess these same language and speaking skills. A college student seeking a position within a campus recreation department typically will not have extensive experience in the workplace. Thus, their language/speaking skills could be lacking. The college recreation student employee experience can be enhanced by campus recreation departments that provide students with training to improve their language and speaking skills.

Conclusions

The results of this study strongly suggest that campus recreation directors value job applicants at all levels who have excellent communication skills and prior experience in campus recreation. In addition, those applying for graduate assistant and student employee positions need to recognize the importance in presenting a neat overall visual appearance during the interview process. This study was designed to identify characteristics, attributes, and competencies for professional, graduate assistantship, and student employee positions that campus recreation directors ranked as important when considering candidates for professional, graduate assistantship, and student employee vacancies. However, the study also brought to light the relative unimportance of qualifications such as grade point average and the CRSS certification. Although most colleges have a minimum GPA required for acceptance into graduate school, GPA was not something respondents viewed as a primary qualification needed for hiring graduate assistants. Further research is needed to investigate the associations and relationships between the variables considered in this study.

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