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Exploring Park Director Roles in Promoting Community Physical Activity

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Abstract

Background—Parks provide numerous opportunities for physical activity (PA). Previous studies have evaluated parks' physical features, but few have assessed how park staff influence PA.

Methods—We conducted semi-structured interviews with 49 park directors, focusing on perceptions of their role, park programs, marketing and outreach, external collaborations, and PA promotion. Directors also completed a questionnaire providing demographics, education and training, and other personal characteristics.

Results—Park directors' descriptions of their roles varied widely, from primarily administrative to emphasizing community interaction, though most (70–80%) reported offering programs and community interaction as primary. Including PA in current programs and adding PA-specific programs were the most commonly reported ways of increasing PA. Also noted were facility and staffing improvements, and conducting citywide marketing. Many directors felt inadequately trained in marketing. Most parks reported community collaborations, but they appeared fairly superficial. An increasing administrative burden and bureaucracy were recurring themes throughout the interviews.

Conclusions—Staff training in marketing and operation of PA programs is needed. Partnerships with health departments and organizations can help facilitate the PA promotion potential of parks. As there are competing views of how parks should be managed, standardized benchmarks to evaluate efficiency may help to optimize usage and PA promotion.

Keywords

Community based participatory research; park staff; marketing; physical activity

INTRODUCTION

Engaging in physical activity is one of the most important health habits known to contribute to a variety of positive health outcomes, including longevity, increased quality of life and levels of daily functioning, and reduced rates of diabetes and obesity [1]. However, currently in the United States, 58% of children, 92% of adolescents, and 95% of adults do not meet physical activity recommendations [2]. As the burden of chronic conditions continues to rise, finding affordable and sustainable ways to promote regular physical activity (PA) is important to improving community health.

Neighborhood parks provide numerous opportunities for both sedentary and active recreation simply as open space [3–5]. While initially envisioned as a means to preserve and showcase nature and as a setting for relaxation and leisure [6], public parks have continued to evolve and now have come to be seen also as important community resources and important destinations for many types of recreation [7]. Further, parks have now been shown to play a critical role in facilitating physical activity in urban, minority communities [7–11], not only by providing facilities and scheduled, supervised activities, but also by providing

destinations to which people can walk – even though they might be sedentary after arriving there [12]. As such, parks are now recognized as valuable assets in the fight against overweight and obesity [13, 14].

In recent years the research community increasingly has turned its attention towards determining how exactly parks can help increase physical activity [3–5, 7–12, 15–24]. To that end multiple tools have been developed to measure how parks' physical attributes [15, 16, 21] and some aspects of the social environment[19] influence usage. While these instruments consider a wide range of park attributes, a common theme is a focus on the park itself and the facilities and programs that it offers to park users. However, what is not captured is how park management and leadership influence park use and physical activity.

The organized programs that parks offer have been shown to be important factors in determining park usage levels [17, 24]. There are a number of ways that these programs might be operated, such as by contracting with an external vendor, offering permits to outside leagues or groups, or by the park staff themselves. In the latter scenario, onsite staff and local volunteers determine what activities and programs are offered at the park and how park facilities are utilized. In this way, the staff are uniquely positioned to influence park usage and activity levels via their overall management of park resources. The extent to which they can be successful may depend on professional motivation, previous experience, education, and training.

There is a robust field of investigation into managerial factors as they relate to general leadership and administration; however, there are fewer management studies focused on the recreation and physical activity fields [25–29]. Currently there is no standard of operational metrics (e.g., budget, program participant numbers, maintenance), to quantify a park's success in promoting physical activity. So while some recreation management strategies have been formulated, unlike their counterparts in other fields, park managers do not enjoy the benefits of an extensive investigative history that could help them to optimize the benefits of active recreation.

This brief report explores park directors' perspectives that could inform future efforts to measure and promote park success in optimizing physical activity among local residents. The data come from qualitative interviews that were conducted with 49 park directors as part of a larger community-based participatory research (CBPR) study aimed at increasing park use and physical activity in collaboration with park directors and community park advisory boards. Study components included: assessment of the level of park usage and physical activity through systematic observations using SOPARC[19], and surveys of park users and residents across a diverse set of urban parks; collaboration with park directors and park advisory boards to design park-based interventions to increase outreach, park usage, and physical activity; and evaluation of park usage and physical activity after implementing the interventions. The park directors were important partners in the CBPR process, and these baseline interviews helped us explore their level of participation in and commitment to the project goals, and provided a better understanding of the history and context of each park participating in the study. The interviews explored park directors' motivations and perceptions of their roles, how they managed their own facility, and their perspectives of how parks can increase community physical activity.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of these qualitative interviews, in particular the park directors' views of their role, park programming and physical activity and the extent to which they are focused on collaborating with and reaching out to the community surrounding their park. These findings provide an important description of

management structures that potentially affect park use, and suggest how park staff can be involved in efforts to optimize park-based physical activity.

METHODS

All of the parks included in this study were part of the 160+ parks classified as “recreation centers” by the city parks department, meaning that they had a staffed recreation facility onsite. While not all parks provided the same mix of facilities, most had multiple indoor spaces (e.g., gymnasium, class rooms), outdoor sports fields and courts, and children’s play areas; and several had walking paths and outdoor fitness equipment. Average park size was 12.92 acres, but there was substantial variation among individual parks (Table 1). Hours of operation varied slightly from park to park, but at the time of the interviews each park had onsite staff and instructors available throughout the day on each day of the week. Staff members were available for general information and also led park programs (e.g., arts classes, camps, sports programs). Outside of the hours of operation the indoor facilities were locked and no park -run programs were offered, but most outdoor spaces remained available to the public(except for one park that was fenced and could be completely locked outside of open hours).

The original sample consisted of 51 parks (i.e., recreation centers) that were selected to represent communities with a large proportion of at least one of four predominant race or ethnic groups (African American, Latino, Asian, and white) throughout a large metropolitan area. Of the 51 parks originally invited to participate, one park opted out(the director was in favor, but experienced substantial community opposition and therefore they did not participate); two that targeted very specific populations (e.g., a therapeutic center, which provides recreation services for people with disabilities) were replaced, and a third was replaced due to concerns for data collector safety. Parks with known and severe safety concerns were excluded from the initial list of eligible sites (based on park visits, discussions with park personnel, and a review of publicly available crime statistics).

As noted above, during the baseline data collection phase of the larger project we conducted in-person interviews with the directors at each of the 50 parks. One director was interviewed twice as he was transferred from one intervention park to another during baseline data collection. The second interview with this director was excluded from this analysis to avoid duplication. These confidential interviews lasted an average of approximately 45 minutes (range = 20 minutes to 2 hours), and were conducted by the study’s project coordinator. The 15-question interview guide was field-tested and reviewed for appropriateness by a park director (not participating in the study) prior to implementation. We obtained verbal consent prior to starting each interview. Prior to implementation the RAND Human Subjects Protection Committee approved the data collection tools described here.

Initially we planned to audio-record the interviews, but the first interviewee expressed concern about being recorded (so that interview was not recorded); during this first interview it became apparent that for some it would be an opportunity to speak frankly about some of their frustrations in carrying out their roles. To encourage respondents to speak more freely we elected not to record any of the remaining interviews, following the rule of thumb proposed by Strauss and Corbin to transcribe as much of the interviews as is needed to achieve study goals [30]. We did, however, ask for and receive permission to take notes during the interviews. While transcripts might be preferred, Bernard and Ryan suggest that field notes should not be dismissed as qualitative data sources [31]. The interviews were conducted at a pace that allowed for both accurate note taking and a consistent flow of conversation, and notes were expanded upon immediately after concluding the interview. The interviewer was experienced in qualitative interviewing and received additional training

so as to improve accuracy of note-taking in situations where recording is not possible or advisable.

The interview guide addressed multiple domains, namely, park directors' perception of their role, park programs, marketing and outreach, external collaborations, and physical activity promotion. Each domain consisted of between one and several questions on the interview. Exploring these domains was intended to provide context at each of the individual sites, as well as information about the larger park system. While physical activity was of primary interest to the overall study, each of the above domains was addressed separately during the interview, not explicitly as something related to PA promotion. Some of the questions used were:

- What is your primary role as the director in charge?
- How would you describe a successful neighborhood or community park?
- As the director in charge with which local community-based organizations do you collaborate? How do you collaborate with these organizations?
- What do you think can be done to improve the park to increase physical activity in your community?
- What are the greatest barriers to promoting physical activity in the park?

In addition to the in-person, semi-structured interview, we asked park directors to fill out a questionnaire focused on demographics (age, race/ethnicity) and other personal characteristics (languages spoken, whether they lived in the community served by the park, education, training, and professional background). This 10-question questionnaire was initially sent via email with instructions to complete and return via email, fax, or mail. Telephone and in-person follow up was conducted as needed.

Data analysis relied upon a grounded theory approach to coding qualitative data [32, 33]. Key themes were identified inductively, in combination with content coding procedures [34–36]. The researchers organized manual notes from the interviews into a data display matrix by copying text into an Excel spreadsheet [37, 38]; rows represented individual interviews, and columns represented questions and resulting themes and categories. One worksheet contained all interviews and all questions, and a similarly structured worksheet was created for each individual question and its related themes and categories. Using this format allowed the interviews to be analyzed by question as well in their totality. In addition to a priori domains or topics that were part of the interview protocol, the researchers added themes and categories that emerged upon careful review of interview notes. Using keywords and phrases the researchers were able to summarize the interviews in terms of both existing and missing data.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Of the park directors included, 47 (96%) returned the demographics questionnaire and all 49 participated in the in-person interview. Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic and other personal characteristics of the participants. Just over half of the directors were male. Thirty-four percent of respondents reported as African American, 30% white, 23% as Latino/Hispanic, and 9% as Asian/Pacific Islander. Almost all directors reported having completed at least undergraduate studies, including 23% who achieved a graduate degree. Nearly 40% of the directors studied some field of recreation and sports management or physical education.

Park Directors' Views of their Role

Park directors gave widely varying descriptions of their role, ranging from being the “site administrator,” and describing it as an essentially managerial role, to needing to wear many more hats, such as, “director, counselor, teacher, father...” Some emphasized completing reports and assorted paperwork, while another described the need to “put out political fires” created by community members and act as a “gatekeeper” between community members and upper management. Two directors (4%) indicated that health promotion was also an important part of the director role.

Seventy-one percent of the directors identified community interaction as a primary component of their role. Analysis of the words used to describe their interaction with the community showed a continuum ranging from an active role (“lead”) to a rather more passive one (“respond to”). Nearly a quarter of the sample indicated a proactive relationship with the community with descriptions such as “outreach,” “community building,” and “providing leadership.” Most of the directors tended towards the center of the continuum, using words such as “providing” and “offering services” (Figure 1).

Offering park programs was the most often reported component of the director’s role, at 80%. While directors reported different methods of providing programs, it was widely recognized as an important component of their job, and at times the topic generated enthusiastic responses. As in the case of one director who said, “Find me 10 people who will attend, and we’ll do it.” Another indicated trying to offer what the community doesn’t have and what she thinks they might need or want: “Try to get the community out of their box, get them to try new things.”

Park Directors' Views on Park Programming and Promoting Physical Activity

When asked how individual parks could help to increase physical activity, the most common response was to include physical activity in more of the program offerings and to add programs that specifically target physical activity (61%). Making improvements to the physical environment, such as building a bigger or better gym, installing a walking path, and adding fitness equipment, was a close second at 59%, and just under a quarter (24%) suggested increasing total staff numbers and contracting instructors who have experience teaching physical activity classes. Several directors mentioned the need to match staff skills to community member interests.

We also asked directors to describe how the city parks department could help increase physical activity. Many of the responses related to removing bureaucratic obstacles and lessening directors’ increasing administrative burden, and insufficient budgeting. Fifty-three percent of directors indicated improvements to park staffing (e.g., physical activity specific training, reducing transfers, matching employee skills to community member interests) as a priority. Also often noted was the need for the city parks department to conduct citywide marketing campaigns.

Specific barriers that parks face with regard to promoting physical activity were also discussed. While relieving facility and resource limitations and the removal of administrative obstacles were often identified as ways to increase physical activity, the most commonly cited barriers were related to community demographics. Teenagers and adolescents were described as hard to reach, even though directors felt that parks offer numerous recreational opportunities to this group. Competition from computers and gaming devices were reported as obstacles, and directors felt that they are at a competitive disadvantage due to parks’ limited resources. Cultural and racial differences and language barriers were also mentioned.

As noted above, directors felt that programs were an important part of promoting physical activity and a primary focus of their role. Sixty-one percent of the directors indicated that programs were directly linked to a park's overall success. When asked how they determine what programs to offer, all but three directors reported community input as an important factor. These same three directors also did not indicate community interaction as a primary role of the park director.

Community Collaboration

Ninety percent of the directors reported some form of collaboration with one or more community organizations. However, the number of community organizations with which they collaborated was often small (2 or 3), and the depth of collaboration was fairly superficial. For example, 28 (57%) of the park directors mentioned collaborating with schools, but this consisted mostly of allowing schools to use park space for their own activities, and parks distributing park flyers at schools. Public agencies such as public safety departments and the housing authority (37%), and neighborhood councils (33%) were the next most frequently mentioned. Less frequently mentioned organizations (<10 directors) included sports organizations, local community-based organizations, places of worship, and anti-gang initiatives. One director suggested that there currently is not enough collaboration, which leads to "turf battles" and duplication of services in his community, saying, "What we need is more cooperation between existing organizations, not more organizations to compete for the same target group and same funding dollars."

Marketing and Outreach

Finally, we asked directors how they market park programs and how they have tried to reach out to the surrounding community. Most of the community input that informed park programming was reported to have come unsolicited from park users who sought out park staff, though attempts to actively reach out to the community were reported by over half of the directors. These directors mentioned having conducted surveys of program participants and a community needs assessment that parks are reportedly required to complete every five years.

Nearly all respondents indicated that they print flyers, park brochures, or class schedules. About half of the respondents said that they deliver flyers to local schools, though respondents gave mixed reviews on the effectiveness of this method. Some schools permit park staff to deliver the flyers directly to classes or students while others only allow them to place a stack of flyers on a table and hope that the kids pick them up on their own. Approximately a third reported using an internet site (i.e., the city parks department website) to post park information, and even fewer (20%) reported use of email to disseminate park information. Most of the directors felt that they did not have sufficient background or training to do their own marketing and recommended that the city parks department provide directors with marketing training and conduct citywide marketing.

Cross-cutting Theme: Administrative Burden and Bureaucracy

During analysis of the interview responses a major theme emerged that cut across the different categories around which we had developed the interview guide: administrative burden and bureaucracy. This theme came up at numerous points throughout the interviews and seemed especially important to these directors as something that affected their ability to carry out their role.

For some directors the interview presented an opportunity to voice frustrations, and one of those most commonly asserted was an increasing administrative burden. Many directors reported that their time was increasingly consumed by paperwork, meetings, and general

administration, which they felt impacted negatively their ability to interact with and serve the community and provide appropriate programs. At one extreme, one director reported that, “upper management is more interested in paperwork than recreation.” The park system’s practice of frequently transferring directors from one park to another, thereby creating a lack of consistency in park leadership, also was identified as an important obstacle to park operations. For example, one director explained, “[The] constant transfer of directors to new facilities creates a disincentive to create new programs that the community wants. If you start a new program you don’t know if you’ll still be around to see it flourish, so why bother?”

Closely related to the administrative burden were the continuous decline of park budgets and scarcity of resources, as they are asked to do more with less. Also mentioned was the lack of a formal network between park directors, which some felt hindered their ability to share ideas with their colleagues across the city and thereby improve the services offered.

DISCUSSION

Numerous studies have shown parks to be an important tool in physical activity promotion [8, 9, 12, 17, 24]. However, the focus to date often has been on the physical environment, for example, proximity to park, park amenities, size, and park type. Regarding the rather less tangible social environment, momentary observation tools suggest that organized activities attract the most people to a park [17, 24]. The presently reported study takes a step further by exploring how park directors determine the programs and activities to be offered, thereby affecting park usage and physical activity.

Many of these directors conveyed a sense of commitment and responsibility toward the local community. Nearly all directors considered community input important in determining what programs and activities should be offered, and a majority of the group indicated community interaction as primary to the director’s role. However, many of them also felt that their ability to effectively engage with the community is being compromised by an increasing administrative load and transfers from one park to another.

Administrative burden and lack of consistency seemed to beat the forefront of many directors’ thoughts, as those topics were often mentioned throughout the interview. During the economic downturn at the time of the interviews (2008–2010), these issues became even more important as parks underwent significant budget cuts and loss of staff and the department moved park directors from site to site to keep the system functioning. At the beginning of our study (2008) nearly all parks had a dedicated recreation coordinator responsible for the operation of park programs (in addition to the park director), facilitating their ability to promote active recreation and physical activity. As of summer 2010, many of the parks in this sample were in danger of losing this position due to budget cuts.

Park directors indicated that each park presents a unique set of circumstances (e.g., interests, population race/ethnicity, and income levels), and as such, a cookie-cutter approach to park management cannot work well. However, with 400+ facilities under operation, some level of standardization across the parks might be desirable from a system management standpoint. There is apparent tension between these competing points of view, whether it is better to adopt a uniform approach with a standard program mix and fee schedule, or a variable model that can adapt to each unique community.

Cultural and linguistic barriers could present challenges at some parks, as nearly 60% of the park directors reported a different race or ethnicity than that of the majority population in a 1-mile radius of their respective parks (based on 2000 US census figures). Many of these parks are located in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, where Spanish is often the

preferred language of many residents. Yet only 19% of the directors reported at least basic Spanish speaking ability. These factors are important considering that many directors indicated that having the trust of, and being able to effectively interact with, the community was important to the success of the park.

Park directors emphasized facility upgrades as a way to increase community physical activity, with programming a close second. This sentiment is supported by the findings of previous work showing that facility renovations are related to increased physical activity [23, 39, 40]. While upgrades and renovations play an important role, a previous study in this same metropolitan area found that facility upgrades alone may not be sufficient to increase physical activity, suggesting that there are also other factors important to the equation [17].

Directors also recognized the importance of marketing and outreach, and were eager to implement marketing initiatives as part of the intervention. Only a handful of parks reported consistent use of technologies like email or the internet to promote park activities, lagging behind much of the competition in the recreation field. As a result of this apparent opportunity, our project decided to focus more of our intervention efforts on marketing, and we consequently hired a marketing consultant to conduct training workshops and marketing consultations in each of the 33 intervention parks.

The results of studies looking at the behavioral effects of media campaigns targeting increased physical activity are mixed [41–44], but do seem a promising part of comprehensive efforts. Emphasizing marketing has the potential to increase park use [45, 46], and a lack of awareness of programs offered by a park has been identified as a barrier to park use [47, 48], but how marketing and other media campaigns might affect physical activity in a park has yet to be evaluated.

It became apparent through our interviews with park directors that collaborations with local organizations in the community are limited. The notion that parks can productively collaborate with other organizations and sectors (and vice versa) to increase physical activity is not new [49–51] and the sharing of facilities by schools and parks has been successful in some instances [52]. There can be a myriad of guidelines that govern these formal collaborations and relationships. However, finding ways to encourage collaborations between parks and other community entities such as public health practitioners and health service providers, places of worship, and community service organizations and clubs may help attract more park users, promote income generating park programs, and increase physical activity.

Responses to the self-report survey suggest that there is not a uniform path to becoming a park director. While many directors did indicate an academic background in a recreation related field, over half bring educational experience from a wide range of fields. The racial and ethnic composition of this director sample largely resembles the racial and ethnic diversity of this metropolitan region. All of this produces substantial variation among directors, and likely a large pool of talent and skills that could benefit the system if made accessible across the park system through some form of knowledge-sharing network.

LIMITATIONS

The interviews reported here were conducted in one major metropolitan area, within a park system that employs onsite park management staff. The opportunities and challenges reported by this park director sample may differ in other cities or regions, and other park systems may not employ onsite staff or offer programs to park users. Each interview was conducted with the director in charge at the time of data collection. As some of them were relatively new to the facility, they might not have been as knowledgeable about park

activities as directors with longer tenures at their parks. Only baseline interview results are reported here. We expect that follow up interviews taking place in 2010–2012 will illuminate further the ways in which directors manage their park, and how they can be encouraged to promote physical activity.

Most interviews were conducted by one person, though on several occasions the interviewer was accompanied by a second person who assisted with note taking. As one person both conducted the interview and took notes without the assistance of audio recording, it is possible that some of the interviews were not captured in full detail.

CONCLUSIONS

Providing park staff with the training and support needed to operate physical activity programs and market them to the public (or finding external contractors to do so) is an important role that parks departments can play at the system level. Matching staff with specific skill sets (e.g., teaching physical activity classes, marketing, language and cultural skills) to the parks where their abilities are needed most, and then allowing them to stay there long enough to develop sustainable programs, can help at individual parks. Given the potential impact parks can have on physical activity, these issues warrant more attention, both by parks department personnel and entities that can help formulate relevant strategies. Further, if the potential of urban parks to facilitate physical activity is to be fully realized, it is likely that partnerships with public health departments and other organizations that can provide training and support will be needed.

As with other common goods, there are competing views of how public parks are to be valued and managed, which may hinder the development of standardized benchmarks to help evaluate efficiency. However, in other areas such as a national health service or natural resource stocks, benchmarks and metrics abound in continuing (if not always successful) efforts to better manage the goods in question. We would do well to take a similar path with parks to be better able to increase their value and determine how they can best serve the community.

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Figure 1.
Park directors' views of their role relating to the local community

Table 1

Park characteristics(n=50)

Characteristics	Mean (SD)	Range
Acres	12.92 (14.3)	0.8–21.0
Full time employees per park	2.27 (0.59)	1–4
Part time employees per park	13.53 (8.86)	3–50
Population density within 1-mile radius (2000)	39,271 (23,784)	8,411–115,853
% Households in poverty within 1-mile radius (1999)	23.6 (12.3)	4.0–42.5
% Hispanic within 1-mile radius (2000)	47.7 (27.0)	3.7–92.3
% African American within 1-mile radius (2000)	12.9 (16.9)	0.5–61.4
% Asian within 1-mile radius (2000)	9.6 (10.3)	0.2–54.9
% White within 1-mile radius (2000)	42.9 (23.9)	10.9–94.0

Table 2

Park director characteristics(n=47)

Characteristic	Percentage of Sample
Male	55
Race or ethnicity	
African American or Black	34
Latino or Hispanic	23
White	30
Asian/Pac. Islander	9
Other	4
Educational level	
Masters	23
Bachelors	72
Associates	4
Area of study	
Social sciences/Liberal arts	38
Recreation/Sports mgmt.	23
Physical education	15
Fine arts	8
Business	5
Health sciences	5
Median years as director (range)	10 (1.0 –36.5)
Median years with parks dept. (range)	17 (4.3 –36.5)
Median years at current facility (range)	3 (1.0 –34.5)