

# The Fulfillment of Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation and Related Professions Standards Through a Youth-Adult Partnership

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Received: April 2, 2020

Accepted: May 15, 2020

Online Published: May 20, 2020

doi:10.5430/jct.v9n2p62

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v9n2p62>

## Abstract

The Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT) outlines standards for recreation programs to ensure a quality educational experience. The current case study presents findings from a youth-adult partnership in support of various COAPRT standards to assist in the development of aspiring recreation professionals. Observation and reflection data from two consecutive partnerships between youth in a high school Physical Education course and collegiate students from a Historically Black College University's Health, Physical Education, and Recreation program are presented based on the four dimensions of Wu, Kornbluh, Weiss, and Roddy's (2016) youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) rubric. The results are presented based on the Y-AP rubric's dimensions: authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocity, and community connectedness to illustrate how they support COAPRT standards 7.01(a) (b), 7.02, and 7.03 (COAPRT, 2014). Implications are provided to support the value a Y-AP implementation can provide recreation management programs as they seek and maintain COAPRT accreditation in the development of their students.

**Keywords:** youth-adult partnership, recreation management, curriculum, student development

## 1. Introduction

Undergraduate recreation students matriculate through undergraduate programs entrusting those programs to provide them with opportunities and skills that will allow them to be successful in their professional careers. The park and recreation field offers a variety of employment settings that range from public/government recreation settings (i.e. park and recreation departments), commercial settings (i.e. fitness centers), non-profit (i.e. YMCA's), to recreation therapy agencies serving individuals with disabilities. The multitude of types of recreation settings places unique challenges and objectives on recreation programs charged with preparing students for full-time, entry level employment (Hurd, Elkins, & Beggs, 2014). In result, many recreation programs employ the accreditation standards set forth by the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT), established by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA). COAPRT is the professional body that governs the accreditation process for university Parks, Recreation and Tourism programs (COAPRT, 2014). Whether a program is accredited by COAPRT or simply employs their standards, park, recreation and tourism faculty seek ways to develop and align their curriculum to meet the needs of their students as outlined by COAPRT. In doing so, COAPRT emphasizes learning outcomes in content areas to include: foundations (e.g. history, philosophy, etc.), service provisions (i.e. leadership, facility management), and management and administration (i.e. finance, marketing, and technology), concluded by an internship. The culmination of programs meeting these standards is believed to provide students with a strong foundation for success in their employment.

Coincidentally, scholars have been critical of the traditional use of classroom teaching, with limited practical experiences, to stunt the preparedness of students achieving the professional competencies desired by parks, recreation and tourism professionals (Hurd & Schlatter, 2007). Recreation programs are increasingly seeking experiential experiences for their students (Zimmerman, Dupree, and Hodges, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2016). Recognizing the uniqueness of the challenge to adhere to the standards provided by COAPRT and provide

hands-on opportunities for students to generate the development of competencies desired by recreation professionals, the authors conducted a case study investigation to assess the alignment of a youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) in a course based on COAPRT standards. Developing course curriculum to encompass opportunities for students to develop hard and soft skills requires intentionality (Chase & Masberg, 2008). The authors believe that Y-AP provide opportunities for adults to develop strong personal and professional skills desired by recreation professionals.

## 2. Literature Review

The increased need for diverse skill sets within the recreation profession calls for further examination of recreation course curriculum (Schreck et al., 2019; Talmage et al., 2017). Recreation curriculum is often situated in COAPRT competencies that allows for program flexibility in their assessment and adherence to these competencies. Programs that adhere to the standards and competencies set forth by COAPRT are recognized to support a recreation graduate's successful entry into the recreation industry (Zimmerman et al., 2014). However, malalignment between academic preparation and job readiness has been documented to create a troubling binary between recreation academics and practitioner desires (Samdahl, 2016). Assessing the entry-level competencies desired by recreation employers shows an unpreparedness among graduating recreation professionals based on employer desires for career readiness among graduating students (Hurd et al., 2014; Fulthrop & D'Eloia, 2015). Employers are recognizing that graduates possess much of the hard skill knowledge needed by entry level professionals, such as research and program planning knowledge, but are lacking many of the soft skills required by the service oriented profession (Fulthrop & D'Eloia, 2015). For example, Fulthrop and D'Eloia (2015) assessed 68 competencies of desired skills by recreation employers and found that communication and interpersonal skills were of the highest importance. Hurd et al. (2014) conducted a similar study assessing entry level competencies of recreation professionals and found that students were more confident in a competency when they had experience in the documented competency. Even, Schreck et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative assessment of the effects a service learning project had on graduate attributes. The results of their examination showed statistically significant improvements in leadership skills, research skills, and adaptability after having real-time experiences.

To support the developmental experiences of students to gain these skills, recreation programs are adopting various experiential pedagogical practices (Price & Been, 2018; Schreck et al., 2019; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2016; Weybright et al., 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2014). Experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Experiences observed within recreation programs' experiential curriculum are used to complement academic content in an intentional way. In doing so, program partnerships are often established with community entities and/or organizations to address an identified initiative that aligns with desired course outcomes (VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2016). Course outcomes from experiential learning initiatives include academic integration of course content (McKay & Estrella, 2008), enhancement of professionals competences (VanSickle & Schaumleffel., 2016), and adopting reflective practices (Watson et al., 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2014), among others. For example, Zimmerman et al. (2014) assessed the reflections of recreation students participating in a service learning project and found that they were able to develop strong soft skills, such as creativity and innovation, time management skills, and communication skills, along with industry recognized hard skills (i.e. research). Formally assessing the project's alignment with COAPRT competencies, the results showed that the project improved the confidence of students on entry-level competencies desired by recreation employers (Hurd et al., 2014).

Intentional service learning projects are recognized as a valuable developmental tool using an experiential learning lens for student development that can be aligned with course curriculum (Schreck et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2014). The flexibility of experiential learning opportunities allows for innovative pedagogical practices for student skill development, such as youth-adult partnerships. A primary distinction between service learning and a Y-AP is the connection with the community or organization one is serving. For an aspirant recreation professional, gaining real time knowledge of the host community while working alongside the host community versus for the host community. This approach supports the community connectedness and the development of various hard and soft skills desired by future employers that are not easily generated in a traditional classroom (Fisher et al., 2017).

### 2.1 Youth-Adult Partnerships

Youth-adult partnerships are not a new concept, but has emerged as a strong proponent for engaging youth in personal and "voice" development (Zeldin et al., 2005). Y-AP are rooted prominent developmental theories from Dewey's (1938) theory of experiential learning, Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) theory of ecological human development. Zeldin and colleagues (2013) operationalized and

defined Y-AP as a theoretical framework. They defined Y-AP as:

The practice of (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together (b) In a collective (democratic) fashion (c) over a sustained period of time (d) through shared work (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or to affirmatively address a community issue. (p. 388)

Y-AP encompass an egalitarian relationship between youth and adults to address social justice issues, strengthen organizations, and enhance community and civic engagement (Zeldin Christens, & Powers, 2013). There is an intentionality on behalf of adults (and youth) required for successful Y-AP. The collaborative interaction between youth and adults has been noted to positively impact the personal and professional development of youth as they transition into adulthood (Lawford & Ramey, 2015). Much of the literature that assesses the implementation of Y-AP focus on the benefits afforded to youth participants (Camino, 2005; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Weybright, Trauntvein, & Deen, 2017; Zeldin, Gauley, et al., 2015). The current article does not seek to address the various PYD outcomes provided by youth participation in Y-AP, but rather examine how Y-AP can greatly benefit the development of adults through coursework (Mitra, 2009; Zeldin, 2004), specifically aspiring recreation professionals. The authors believe that many of the same qualities aimed at the development of youth participants can also be observed for adult participants. PYD outcomes include youth voice in decision making, youth empowerment and community and civic engagement (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013; Zeldin, Gauley, et al., 2015), taking initiative (Larson, 2000), confidence and agency (Larson & Hansen, 2005), among other qualities. Understood in this way, the authors believe Y-AP can also benefit aspiring park and recreation professionals.

Recreation programs often employ service learning projects within their courses to support the development of their students to meet COAPRT standards (Zimmerman et al., 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2016).

There is a dearth of information that provides insight into the developmental qualities afforded to adult participants participating in a Y-AP (Jones & Perkins, 2006; Price & Been, 2018). Specifically, when assessing a program partnership's alignment with:

COAPRT Standard 7.01:

Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate the following entry-level knowledge: a) the nature and scope of the relevant park, recreation, tourism or related professions and their associated industries; b) techniques and processes used by professionals and workers in these industries. (COAPRT, 2014, p. 13)

COAPRT standard 7.02:

Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate the ability to design, implement, and evaluate services that facilitate targeted human experiences and that embrace personal and cultural dimensions of diversity. (COAPRT, 2014, p. 15)

COAPRT standard 7.03:

Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate entry-level knowledge about operations and strategic management/administration in parks, recreation, tourism and/or related professions. (COAPRT, 2014, p. 15).

In an attempt to assess the alignment of a Y-AP and COAPRT standards, the current case study examines the observational results of a Y-AP.

### 3. Methods

The current case study seeks to provide an observational description of the facilitation of a Y-AP's four components to address COAPRT standards 7.01(a)(b), 7.02, and 7.03. The Y-AP observed were conducted during the spring 2016 and spring 2017 school year.

#### 3.1 Participants

The partnerships consisted of a purposive, convenience sampling of 18 adult and youth participants, nine youth and nine adults each year. Adult participants were enrolled in a Senior Seminar course at a Historically Black College University (HBCU) and were provided with an option to participate in the Y-AP project or an alternative course assignment. If an adult chose to participate in the Y-AP project they were informed that there would be no penalty towards their completion of the course and an alternative assignment would be provided by their instructor. On average, adult participants consisted of six men and three women aged 19-23 years old. All adults had some varying experience managing a recreational event from previous Health, Physical Education and Recreation courses. On average, the nine

youth participants were self-identified females who ranged from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, aged 14-18. Youth and adult participants were located in separate rural towns in the Midwest region. The purposive and convenient sampling of participants is based on the requirement that the partnership took place during normal hours of the school day versus an after-school program for retention purposes of high school students.

### 3.2 Procedures

Institutional review board (IRB) approval, as well as the approval from the host high school principal and physical education (PE) course instructor, the HBCU program's Dean, Department Chair, and course instructor was extended prior to implementation of the study. Upon IRB approval, consent forms were then distributed and completed by the youth's parents, adult participants, and assent forms by youth participants. All individuals were informed that participants would meet twice a week for eight weeks at the host high school, during the youth's one hour and fifteen minute PE course. Adult participants would travel to the host high school to meet with youth to plan a recreational sport event in the host community. Pre and post partnership focus groups were conducted before the group met and after the event occurred during the spring 2016 partnership (see Price & Been, 2018); reflection papers were provided from adult participants during the spring 2017 partnership. Results from those accounts are provided in this article along with direct observations from the co-author for the current article.

During each meeting session, the students would come together to address particular aspects of the program planning process. Initially, group discussions were brainstorming sessions to decide on the type of event, location, and date of event. Proceeding meetings were then divided based on strengths and interests of the students. Examples of groups would be marketing, fundraising, activity selection, food/vendor identification, etc. The co-author attended each session and maintained a qualitative reflection journal that was based on the dimensions provided by the Y-AP rubric. Each day a new journal entry was created based on the occurrences observed at the partnership meeting to document progress, strengths and areas of weaknesses observed in the program planning process.

### 3.3 Assessment

An objective method of assessing youth-adult partnerships is through the Y-AP rubric. The Y-AP rubric is a quantitative survey based on four dimensions to assess the alignment of Y-AP theory with practice (see Wu, Kornbluh, Weiss, & Roddy, 2016). The Y-AP rubric was used as a guide for this study's observational data collection. Consistent with the theoretical framework for Y-AP (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013), observations were conducted based on four dimensions: a) authentic decision making, b) natural mentors, c) reciprocity, and d) community connectedness. Each dimension of the rubric provides space for the observer to provide a qualitative reflection on the prompted quantitative characteristic. For example, authentic-decision making prompts the coder to reflect on the occurrences during and activities regarding youth voice and participation in authentic decision making. The co-author maintained a qualitative, observational journal to collect their observations for each dimension within the hour after each partnership session. To enhance trustworthiness, the co-authors would meet within 24 hours to compare and contrast observations reported in the reflection journal. The results of those reflections are provided in this paper to support Y-AP facilitation in a park and recreation's course curriculum design.

#### 3.3.1 Dimension 1: Authentic Decision Making

Authentic decision making assess how participants are involved in meaningful decision making. This dimension includes observations related to participation in decision making process, support of organizational culture to meet goals, and engagement of voices.

#### 3.3.2 Dimension 2: Natural Mentors

Natural mentors assesses how adults intentionally support relationships that help participants develop. This dimension includes observations based on observed boundaries, enhancement of social capital development, and celebration of group success.

#### 3.3.3 Dimension 3: Reciprocity

Reciprocity assesses how youth and adults work together as partners. This dimension includes observations related to the creation of a mutual agenda and participants being co-learners.

#### 3.3.4 Dimension 4: Community Connectedness

Community connectedness assesses how participants are engaged in their community throughout the partnership. This dimension includes observations towards the development of a sense of community and social capital through community involvement.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Guided by the four dimension of the Y-AP rubric, the current article focuses on the observational reflections and qualitative reflection of Y-APs between high school and Health, Physical Education and Recreation students as it relates to COAPRT standards.

### 4.1 Authentic Decision Making

One of the most important dimensions of a Y-AP is the ability for participants to make meaningful decisions throughout the partnership. The engagement and development among youth participants is noted to support their positive development and translate into other areas of their life by supporting the voicing of their ideas and emphasis of their participation in the decision making process (Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014). Adult participants' inexperience in program planning on such a large scale also benefitted from this process. One of the most definitive practices within both partnerships was the ways decisions were solidified by a democratic process (i.e. majority vote) (COAPRT standard 7.03). During a session it was not uncommon to see a youth or adult participant receiving ideas from the collective group and placing those ideas on the classroom board for a final vote. Group engagement and culture was enhanced through this process because youth and adult participants were fairly even in attendance. The equal numbers facilitated challenge and required support of their ideas from youth and adults in order for an idea to be adopted. This approach allowed both youth and adult participants to be aware that their contributions mattered, especially when their ideas were adopted into the final plan. In addition, the democratic process and involvement of all members in decision making is a common technique/process in the parks and recreation profession (COAPRT standard 7.01(b)), as the industry looks to serve the greater good of the local community by requesting and adhering to community voices in the decision making process.

### 4.2 Natural Mentors

Mentoring is common among many professions and the recreation field is no different. Recreation professionals often find themselves mentoring staff, participants, such as youth, and those seeking internships to fulfill degree requirements. In the current study, inherent to their age gap, youth participants naturally leaned on adult participants for direction. Consequently, adults soon realized that youth's dependence on them would not lead to productive meetings, exchange of ideas, or positive experiences for the program planning process. In an attempt to create boundaries for communication that extended beyond in person meetings, some adults exchanged GroupMe contact information with youth participants that was monitored by a graduate student. This process allowed youth and adults to challenge and support one another's ideas outside of meetings before bringing ideas to the collective. Additionally, during meetings, it was not uncommon for adults to lead by example and show youth participants how to facilitate a phone call to request donations from a potential community vendor (COAPRT standard 7.03). Leading this uncomfortable effort (as expressed by a youth participant), an adult participant assisted youth participants in making calls to request donations. After the youth participants observed the adult participant, youth participants called the next vendor. Moments similar to this occurred often and lent to the supportive camaraderie developed over time. On event day, some youth participants were recalled to ask adult participants about the process of applying to their college. The comfortability and respect observed by youth and adult participants supported the 'natural mentor' characteristic that supported the partnership between youth and adults.

### 4.3 Reciprocity

Even with a slight age difference between youth and adult participants a hierarchy was observed that initially hindered collaboration. The group fell victim to the commonly held belief that older equals more experience, better leadership. To assuage the hierarchy, the group found that when they worked in smaller groups on tasks they found areas of commonality. For example, in the marketing group, youth participants presented ideas about how to create a flyer and what schools and local churches to contact to provide the flyer. As drafts were created for the flyer, youth and adults were able to fine-tune the flyer and contact community partners. Gleaned from the adult's marketing classes, they were able to make suggestions regarding the flyer's aesthetics based on targeted marketing tactics (COAPRT standard 7.01(b)). Adults then took the lead in creating a donation request letter to use when visiting local businesses and requesting donations based on input from youth participants. The final draft was approved by a majority vote. Youth and adults leaned on one another to progress their agenda in regards to marketing, diverse forms of collaboration, collaborating with another group, and fundraising (COAPRT standard 7.03). Over the years, recreation agencies have experienced decreased funding for programming in marginalized communities (Ditz, 2015). Establishing sustainable partnerships with like-minded organizations and institutions has become critical. The first level of reciprocal collaboration stems from the diverse group of participants: being from rural towns, half in high school, half attending a HBCU, allowing participants to see the benefit of their differences (COAPRT standard 7.02); and reaching out to

various local vendors and sponsors for assistance and support (COAPRT standard 7.01(a)). In most cases, the group was able to generate reciprocal exchanges that supported their overall efforts and extended into both communities.

#### *4.4 Community Connectedness*

Participants had a chance to collectively decide on an initiative that impacts their community. In both years, the participants decided on a ‘field day’ that supports the physical activity levels of youth in a rural town, that would include various activities for individuals with disabilities (COAPRT standard 7.01(a)(b); 7.02). Early in the process, the group voted with a stipulation of majority rules to decide on a theme for the event, organizational recipient of funds raised, then different groups were tasked with identifying permits, local vendors, fundraising, inclusive activity offerings, and marketing efforts (COAPRT standard 7.03). In these specialized groups, participants are requested to reach out and make connections with community members to gain their support and inform them of the event as potential participants. Awareness of the community-based event being planned by high school and collegiate students to support the special needs program at the high school quickly generated community backing. None of the participants self-professed having a disability, which encouraged educational training to consider appropriate programming to emphasize inclusive activities to support individuals with disabilities (COAPRT 7.02).

The event was hosted in the hometown of the high school students and required a lot of assistance from the high school students in identifying local supporters, ranging from elementary and middle schools to city board members for approval of permits (COAPRT standard 7.01(a)). The visibility of youth’s community connections assisted the cohesion of the group as weeks passed. As recreation professionals move to their entry level positions they may find that they are in a new community requiring customized programing. To assist this effort, implementation of Y-AP can assist in the development of their professional acumen and community engagement efforts.

### **5. Conclusion**

The authors believe a positive correlation can be drawn from the implementation of a Y-AP to address COAPRT standards. The current case study provides a qualitative documentation of a Y-AP and its ability to support the development of aspiring recreation professionals. As innovative partnerships are consistently introduced into recreation management program courses, faculty seek to identify how those experiences support course content and COAPRT standards (VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2014). However, malalignment exists between academic preparation meeting professionals’ desired competencies (Samdahl, 2016). D’Eloia and Fulthrop (2016) identified experience to be the most salient theme among recreation professionals. In result, the authors believe the unique experience provided by a Y-AP for aspiring recreation professionals can be an essential addition to students’ academic preparation. When appropriately initiated, a Y-AP can be implemented to address numerous COAPRT standards. In the current article, the authors believe COAPRT standards 7.01 (a) (b), 7.02, and 7.03 were observed through a Y-AP in a recreation course. The hard and soft skills inherent to a successful Y-AP can assist aspiring recreation professionals enter their entry-level positions with greater experience and the foundational knowledge needed for the recreation profession (Samdahl, 2016). When Y-APs are observed with collegiate students and high school students, collegiate students are provided first-hand experiences of youth’s needs by working with youth participants in their own development. Recreation professionals are often charged with program planning for youth participants, but Y-AP provides a duality of development that extends beyond youth participants but to themselves as adults, recreation professionals, and citizens of communities.

### **6. Limitations and Future Research**

The current study is not without limitations. First, the results are based on qualitative observations based on two years of Y-AP feedback. As such, the partnership may inherently have fallen subject to bias. The subjective descriptions may limit the scope of analysis to be more positive and overlook the negative aspects of Y-AP implementation. Also, both partnerships are based on small sample sizes with a consistent demographic of participants (i.e. high school and collegiate students). The small sample size limits the generalizability of the results. Future areas of study may diversify the participant pool to aspiring recreation professionals partnering with current recreation professionals. Collegiate participants in the current study were from a Historically Black College University. Merging recreation programs at a Historically Black College University with a Predominantly White Institution could enhance the educational experience of all participants as they partner with a high school or recreation agency. Any of the above integrated partnerships could bolster the experiential benefits afforded to a Y-AP, park and recreation management programs, and park and recreation professionals. Lastly, the current study did not present objective measurements from the Y-AP as it

relates to COAPRT standard. A post-partnership evaluation taken by collegiate student participants to assess COAPRT standards would provide objective data for the support of Y-AP implementation in recreation management courses.

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