What Research Doesn't Tell the Practitioner

by Alan Ewert

A TYPICAL PROBLEM of our recreation profession is the lack of communication between the researcher and the practitioner. Too often we find ourselves talking to those in our particular area and not with anyone else. At seminars and conferences, for instance, the researcher shares findings and problems with other researchers while in the adjoining room, the practitioners discuss their difficulties with other administrators and staff. It does help to talk with others who have similar concerns, but much communication can be lost if ideas are shared only within groups and not between them. This article seeks to address some of the problems and possible solutions of this communication gap.

The recreation profession involves a variety of individuals in different positions and with different areas of specialization. They include: educators, who strive to transmit the necessary skills and knowledge of the profession to their students; students, who may go on to become—practitioners, who are involved with the providing of service to their—participants. The researchers and evaluators complete the picture. Unfortunately, despite the obvious interrelationship between members of the recreation profession, communication is often disjointed or minimal.

Hopefully, all of us know of examples where this is not true, but just as assuredly we also know of many cases where it is. The obvious question is: Why do intelligent, concerned professionals migrate into somewhat isolated groups?

Historically, this has not been the case. Practitioners often became practitioners within the recreation profession. In search of a career change, many would seek additional education and eventually become the recreation and leisure professors who also conducted what research and evaluation was done in the field. Luther Gulick, Jay B. Nash, and Earle Ziegler are but a few examples of this tradition. Those involved communicated more readily, partly because they generally had similar backgrounds, experiences, and shared problems. This linkage is illustrated in Figure 1.

As depicted in the diagram (right), communication occurred between all groups and centered around the provider of recreation services, the practitioner. While this model should still be applicable today, societal and institutional forces have pried apart the traditional linkage of our profession, enabling isolation to make itself felt.

Part of the current problem is structural. In many instances different types of professionals in our field seem to walk down a path of alienation. The quality and complexity of the available information tends to force specialization upon individuals. It becomes increasingly difficult for an educator to stay current in research methodology. Likewise, the practitioner does not often have the time or energy to keep up with the newest modes of evaluation.

As individuals become more specialized, they become subject to new and different expectations. Students become immersed in completing coursework and finding positions within the profession. Educators from education-oriented institutions focus on the progress of their students. Individuals from institutions with traditions of research and publication become involved in research projects and the publication of findings. Practitioners are intimately concerned with the survival of their programs and the generation of income. While perhaps this is to be expected, as professionals we have a tendency to look inward at our problems rather than outward—toward solutions. To paraphrase Geoffrey Godfrey's comment about academics, "We all research but do not think; we all present but do not listen, and we all publish but do not read." Extrapolated to the practitioner, perhaps one can say that we all practice but we tend not to go beyond the tried and true.
Individual and group biases also help perpetuate the communication gap. Researchers and evaluators begin to talk in terms of "t scores," standard deviations, or linear transformations. Practitioners discuss "I.T.P.'s," charting procedures, or cost/benefit ratios. Educators and students become immersed in G.P.A.'s, stanine scores, citation formats, and tenure policies. The different groups develop their own esoteric set of phrases. In short, we lose both the language and the ability to fully communicate with each other. Jargonese becomes the key and the lock between the various groups in our profession.

And what about the participants? What is their language? Fortunately, they help bring us back to our origin with phrases such as: "That was fun; when will this program be offered again? I had a great time!" Obviously, the work of the practitioner, educator/student, and researcher/evaluator is all ultimately meant to provide an enjoyable, beneficial recreation experience. The differences lie in the accomplishment of this goal. Alleviating these differences is important, particularly from the participant's perspective, since any program, curriculum, activity, or therapy which is powerful enough to help, is also powerful enough to hinder.

Typically, when a problem arises, it is placed at the door of a researcher, with the request to "do research on" a given subject. After mysterious juggling an answer is produced, which may or may not have any basis in reality. As R. Shulamit (On Becoming A Social Scientist, 1979) described it, research is frequently conducted on the "hit and run" model—that is, researchers take, hit, and then run, with a tendency to create data rather than meaningful findings. Practitioners often receive little useful information in return for making their participants available for a research study. To judge a study's effectiveness, both the researcher and practitioner must look beyond the scientific front and examine performance. Performance should be measured by its usefulness to the practitioner or by the study's contribution to theory which explains the behavior which takes place in recreation.

A number of issues effect the differences between researchers and practitioners. First, there appears to be a great deal of misperception of each group by the other. Although each has a different function, the functions can and should complement one another. Researchers need to be able to distinguish practical significance from statistical, while practitioners need to replace their common phrase regarding research findings—"I can't use it"—with "I can't use it—right now." These differences are illustrated in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, many of these differences arise from the different environments in which the individuals are involved. Researchers usually come from or are affiliated with universities, while practitioners are generally situated in a field or direct service setting. This has led to inevitable criticism of the "other" group. Often-heard criticisms are listed in Table 2.

Quite possibly Table 2 reflects some of the feelings we have expressed toward practitioners and researchers. Perhaps the paraphrase of a statement by Robert

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**Figure 1**
Optimal Communication Pathway
Greenleaf in his book *Servant Leadership* depicts this: "The real enemy is fuzzy thinking. There is too much intellectual wheel spinning with too much retreating into "research" and too little meaningful, useful knowledge."

Not all of the problem can be laid at the doorstep of the researcher or evaluator. For quality information, staff personnel must open their programs to research and evaluation. A program with no allowance made for any type of evaluation or research will yield little in the way of new theoretical or developmental knowledge. Hamilton (1979) suggests a cooperative effort between the researcher and the practitioner. This cooperation can take the form of scheduled periodic meetings, research done by both academic and field staff, and provisions for the professional development of the practitioner. In the latter case, the practitioner's work environment needs to be considered. For example, to be more effective and better utilized, development opportunities such as program evaluation workshops should be conducted at the workplace and not just in the classroom. If appropriate, graduate credit should be given and the material covered should focus on practice rather than strictly upon theory. H. Lawson (1985) refers to this as "recipe knowledge"—that is, information which is useful in program development. It would be gratifying to see some action taken on the findings of research or evaluation, at least once in a while.

Ultimately, how we educate the upcoming members of our profession helps to determine how closely research and practice will be linked. There exists a definite need to impress upon both our undergraduate and graduate students the importance of research and evaluation techniques. If students are not encouraged to recognize their importance, it is highly unlikely that they will use them later as practitioners. At the graduate level, our students must realize that the world does not end with the t-test or analysis of variance, especially when the social sciences have developed powerful techniques which allow a greater exploration of the ephemeral qualities of human behavior and learning. The profession can no longer afford master's and doctoral graduates who are es-

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**TABLE 1**

**TYPICAL COMMUNICATION PATHWAY**

![Diagram of communication pathway]

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TABLE 2
COMMONLY EXPRESSED CRITICISMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITICISMS OF PRACTITIONERS BY RESEARCHERS</th>
<th>CRITICISMS OF RESEARCHERS BY PRACTITIONERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Never ask the right question</td>
<td>• Never get a straight answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pay little attention to advice</td>
<td>• Too cautious, can never make generalizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Want easy answers</td>
<td>• Never has enough information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not interested in objective truth</td>
<td>• Retreat into research jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reactive rather than proactive</td>
<td>• Could be instead of will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Looking for bargains</td>
<td>• Crackpots versus distinguished - who can tell?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do not comprehend the term “reliability”</td>
<td>• Do not comprehend the term “meaningful”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sentially undergraduates with extra course-work. Likewise, the research project needs to become more than a student exercise. Our field hungers for new and creative ideas in both research and in the actual delivery of recreation services. Students in the recreation profession need to be encouraged to gain skills in both research and practice if the communication gap is to be closed. In addition, we should consider: insisting upon a sound background in natural or social science; improving our students’ quantitative skills; and requiring a formal research project in graduate education.

Because budget restrictions can eliminate the best of cooperative efforts between researchers and practitioners, organizations should consider an “adopt a researcher” program similar to the “adopt a forest or park” programs utilized by the Forest Service and Park Service. This would accomplish a number of objectives. It would allow the researcher access to researchable topics and populations. And it would allow practitioners more control over the research process while providing them with useful information at a minimal cost. The profession would gain more realistic research based on actual participants rather than upon the frequently studied college students.

Finally, researchers and practitioners need to “trade places” once in a while. This is particularly true for the researcher, since the most elegant of theories can be totally fallacious in reality. Likewise, practitioners could gain much insight into the difficulty of developing useful information from research projects. Ultimately, each group—and the profession as a whole—will profit from a greater understanding of the problems faced by the other.

Recreation can be an important component of an individual’s life. To improve it we need to strengthen the links between research and practice. Each party (researchers, practitioners, educators, and evaluators) has a contribution to make. Program evaluation and research must become an integral part of the recreation delivery system. Recreation researchers must realize that major adjustments are being experienced in the scientific community and that the public and practitioners are demanding more useful information. Recreation scientists owe it to society to communicate what is truly important. This “tithing to society” has become a part of every scientist’s responsibility. Practitioners must receive information that can be utilized in their programs if their support is to continue. In conclusion, only by strengthening the information exchange between the various components of the recreation profession can we expect to deliver quality programs to satisfied participants. Completing this cycle will help ensure our vitality for the 1990s and beyond.

“The tragedies of science are the slaying of beautiful hypotheses by ugly facts.”

T.H. Huxley

EDITOR’S NOTE: For a list of references accompanying this article, contact the author at Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.