

Improving National Park Service partnerships: A gap analysis of external partners

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PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PUBLIC AGENCIES AND NON-

profit organizations, corporations, and private businesses are not a new phenomenon. The National Park Service has been involved in partnerships since its creation in 1916 when, for example, it involved the railroads and the hotel industry in providing transportation, meals, and accommodations for the first park visitors. Since then the size and scope of partnerships engaged in by public agencies have grown and the nature of these partnerships has become more complex. Today many park managers regard partnerships as a strategy for more effective park management because they can help expand the range of services a park can offer. They also increase public support by enhancing opportunities for park visitors to learn about and participate in park management and help build a sense of community pride (Vaske et al. 1995).

With this expansive role for partnerships comes the need for NPS managers to be knowledgeable of NPS policies and to possess a variety of management skills if they and stakeholders are to work together optimally. In an interview published on the NPS Web site <http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/>, National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis explained his view that “partnership skills are a core competency.” He continued, “Our employees must be able to find and welcome partners, to reach common ground, and leverage each other’s skills and resources.” Thus partnership management is a core competency that can help to carry out the NPS mission and deliver public service at a higher level. The challenge is to more effectively grow this competency by building on past partnership successes and developing new capacity for enhanced partnership management Service-wide. However, very little effort has been made to study, understand, and manage partnerships in a proactive manner.

Earlier study and latest work

In 2005 the National Park Service and Clemson University entered into a cooperative agreement to determine partnership training and development priorities for NPS employees (phase I) and NPS partners (phase II). Both phases used online surveys to obtain baseline data regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as partnership attitudes, that identified existing and future training needs of employees and partners associated with NPS partnership work. We analyzed data about employee and partner

Abstract

Partnerships between public agencies and nonprofit organizations, corporations, and private businesses are a growing trend, and consequently the nature of these partnerships has become more complex. With this expansive role for partnerships comes the need for the National Park Service and its partners to be knowledgeable of NPS policies and to possess a variety of management skills if they and stakeholders are to work together optimally. In 2005 the National Park Service and Clemson University entered into a cooperative agreement to determine partnership training and development priorities for NPS employees (phase I) and NPS partners (phase II). Both phases used online surveys to obtain baseline data regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as partnership attitudes, that identified existing and future training needs of employees and partners associated with NPS partnership work. This article reports on the second phase of the partnership study, administered in spring 2010 to NPS partners, including but not limited to friends groups (alliances, associates, clubs, conservancies, foundations, societies, and trusts) and cooperating associations across the United States.

Key words

collaboration, gap analysis, parks, partnerships, stewardship, training

perceptions of the importance and preparedness of specific competencies in the performance of their jobs. We then applied a gap analysis to study perceived differences (i.e., a gap) in preparation for, and importance of, specific competencies deemed to be pertinent to their ability to engage in partnerships.

For phase I of the study Weddell et al. (2009) assessed partnership competencies that delineated the importance and performance of active NPS employees regarding partnership activities and identified gaps in training to perform these critical competencies at satisfactory levels. This phase was initiated in fall 2006 through a survey of 18,224 NPS employees. We found that almost two-thirds of respondents reported that their past experiences working with partnerships were rewarding and productive (61.2%); however, another 16% reported that their experience had been difficult, frustrating, and not very productive. More than 60% reported currently being engaged in one or more partnerships. Respondents reported being involved in an average of seven partnerships over the past five years.

According to the phase I study, some of the largest gaps respondents reported in training were (1) the ability to collaborate with philanthropic and grant-making entities; (2) understanding NPS partnership construction requirements; (3) the ability to establish organizational structures that nurture and manage partnerships; (4) the ability to plan effectively for the commitments needed to build a successful partnership (including the knowledge of techniques used to resolve conflicts, grievances, and confrontations); and (5) working effectively with the Department of the Interior's Office of the Solicitor to develop and manage agreements.

Respondents felt that partnership constraints included the lack of a reward structure to engage in partnerships, complex accountability requirements, differing budgeting practices among stakeholders, and challenges of finding flexibility within NPS rules and regulations. Respondents reported that motivations to partner included (1) giving others a better understanding of one's own park, the National Park Service, or its mission; (2) more constructive and less adversarial relationships with stakeholders; (3) better coordination of policies and practices; and (4) leading to better management decisions.

This article reports on the second phase of the partnership study, administered in spring 2010 to all NPS partners, including but not limited to friends groups (alliances, associates, clubs, conservancies, foundations, societies, and trusts) and cooperating associations. We selected a total of 274 NPS partner leaders to participate in the study and asked them to forward the survey on to other employees in their organizations.

The purposes of this research were (1) to describe and discuss the assessment of partnership training gaps identified among partners of the National Park Service, (2) to analyze the gaps NPS partners perceived in their abilities to conduct partnerships successfully, and (3) to report partners' attitudes toward engaging in partnerships with the National Park Service, including motivations and constraints.

Methods

Survey instrument

We initially developed our phase I Web-based survey based on a thorough review of the partnership literature in various fields of study and discussions with NPS management personnel. We took care to identify those variables found to influence partnership behavior by examining previous studies, in terms of both motivations and perceived constraints. Moreover, an exhaustive list of employee competencies pertaining to partnerships was developed by NPS professionals, reviewed by a team of research-

ers, and then incorporated into the instrument. For phase II the survey was reevaluated, refined, and shortened by researchers and professionals in the field for distribution to NPS partners.

The phase II survey instrument consisted of four sections, totaling 118 items. The first section included two identical batteries of 28 competencies depicting knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) regarding entering into partnerships with external organizations. In the first section, respondents were asked to rate the *importance* of each KSA in the conduct of their present job. The same set of questions in the first section was repeated and respondents rated their level of *preparedness* to perform each competency. The second section included four questions about partnership experience with outside organizations. Respondents were asked how many partnerships they were involved with in the five previous years, then were asked about their past, present, and future views of the role of partnerships working with the National Park Service. The third section asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with 16 statements regarding specific motivations and constraints to partnerships found in the literature (Gray 1989; Huxham 2003).

Data analyses

We performed a gap analysis to identify "training gap scores," which were identified for each individual by calculating the difference between preparation (P) and importance (I) scores for each competency. A negative gap score indicated an area in which professionals felt ill-prepared relative to the importance of the competency. A positive gap score indicated the reverse was true; in this case respondents' perception of preparation exceeded the importance they assigned to a particular competency. These gap interpretations suggest partnership competencies that have implications for future education and training of NPS partnering organizations.

Results and discussion

Survey respondent characteristics

The average respondent was 52 years old, white (95%), female (54%), and had attended college (77%). They reported working in partnership with the National Park Service for an average of 12 years. Respondents represented all NPS partnership organization types, including friends groups (27%), cooperating associations (40%), national heritage areas (18%), field institutes or field schools (5%), trail organizations (5%), and the remainder comprising combined friends groups and cooperating associations (5%).

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Partnership training gaps

The largest gap respondents reported involved the “knowledge of NPS policies and legal and reporting requirements for non-profit partners” (−1.18) (see table 1, next page). Other reported gaps were ability to work effectively with the NPS contracting and procurement process to develop and manage agreements (−0.94); understanding of federal and state laws regarding nonprofit/not-for-profit organizations and reporting requirements (−0.84); understanding the “political realities” both nationally and locally where partnerships take place (−0.71); knowledge of the concepts, policies, and practices related to donations and fund-raising partnerships in the NPS (−0.69); ability to effectively plan for the commitments needed to build a successful partnership (e.g., staff time and skills, possible financial commitments, and other resources) (−0.54); and ensuring that innovative partnerships are encouraged while operating within governmental regulatory boundaries (−0.53).

Past, present, and future partnership behaviors and intent

Two-thirds of respondents reported that their past experiences working with the National Park Service were rewarding and productive (76%); however, another 18% reported that their experiences had been difficult, frustrating, and not very productive. Almost half of respondents (49%) reported currently being engaged in one primary partnership with the National Park Service, serving a single park or unit, while almost a quarter (21%) reported being engaged in multiple partnerships, programs, or projects, serving multiple parks or units. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated they intended to (1) remain engaged in one or more NPS partnerships because it is a primary way that their organization will fulfill its mission in the future (42%) or (2) expand or grow their NPS partnerships because they believe it is a better way for their organization to fulfill its mission in the future (53%).

Partnership attitudes

Partnership motivation statements with the highest agreement (1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree) are presented in table 2 (page 53) and include the following: partnerships lead to greater innovation and effectiveness (6.20); partnerships with others (public, private, not-for-profit, or government organizations) can lead to better management decisions (6.04); partnerships

give other organizations a better understanding of their partner’s organization and its mission (5.87); partnerships improve communications among organizations, making it easier to deal with problems (5.80); partnerships expand one’s own organization’s capacity for leadership because decisions are influenced by people with different perspectives (5.77); partnerships allow the pooling of resources, thus saving time and money for each partner (5.16); and partnerships result in better coordination of policies and practices of multiple stakeholders (5.10).

Partnership constraint statements with the highest-level agreement are also summarized in table 2 and deal primarily with policies and governmental regulations: one is frequently challenged to find flexibility within the National Park Service’s rules and policies regarding partnering (4.67); and as accountability requirements within the Park Service increase, they make partnering increasingly complex and difficult (4.57).

Implications and conclusions

Partner organizations are a cornerstone of the National Park Service and help sustain park programs. Understanding perceptions, attitudes, and competencies needed for partner organizations to work in concert with the National Park Service is crucial for long-term partnership viability. Outside partners overwhelmingly agreed that partnerships lead to greater innovation and effectiveness as well as better management decisions. Moreover, 76% of respondents reported their past experiences working with the National Park Service were rewarding and productive. The major constraints were centered on navigating complex regulations and accountability requirements, findings that are similar to those of the phase I study that surveyed NPS employees.

These perceived impediments are often at the federal level, and therefore partnership regulations may need to be reexamined to decrease frustrations among NPS employees and outside partners. Additionally, the National Park Service can address these problems by continuing to offer training programs that focus on understanding the legal requirements and best practices for managing partnerships, specifically for developing agency/bureau agreements, improving communication and collaboration skills, building consensus, and evolving leadership.

Table 1. Partnership competencies with the greatest P-I* gaps

Competencies*	Mean Importance ¹	Mean Preparation ¹	Mean P-I Gap
Knowledge of NPS policies and legal and reporting requirements for nonprofit partners	6.07	4.89	-1.18
Ability to work effectively with the NPS contracting and procurement process to develop and manage agreements	5.18	4.24	-0.94
Understanding of federal and state laws regarding nonprofit/not-for-profit organizations and reporting requirements	6.12	5.28	-0.84
Understanding the “political realities” both nationally and locally where partnerships take place	6.12	5.41	-0.71
Knowledge of interpretive and educational program development in partnership with the NPS	5.7	5	-0.7
Knowledge of the concepts, policies, and practices related to donations and fund-raising partnerships in the NPS	5.66	4.97	-0.69
Demonstrate methods to ensure that NPS work units’ and your organization’s culture can move the NPS mission forward	6.02	5.34	-0.68
Ability to manage partnerships effectively to achieve your organization’s and NPS missions	6.33	5.76	-0.57
Knowledge of negotiating skills and techniques to find mutually acceptable solutions	6.3	5.74	-0.56
Ability to communicate strategic goals, performance expectations, and collaborative work necessary to reach common goals	6.18	5.62	-0.56
Effective communication, listening, and interpersonal skills	6.76	6.21	-0.55
Ability to effectively plan for the commitments needed to build a successful partnership (e.g., staff time and skills, possible financial commitments, and other resources)	5.95	5.41	-0.54
Ensure that innovative partnerships are encouraged while operating within governmental regulatory boundaries	6.08	5.55	-0.53
Ability to work with and through others in achieving a citizen-focused, seamless network of parks, historical places, and open spaces	5.7	5.2	-0.5

*Note: The P-I Gap is a diagnostic statistic based on the function between the importance of a competency and the preparation to perform that competency. Caution must be used in interpreting this statistic since a large gap could conceivably include a measure that is not high in importance, and therefore not worthy of training resources.

¹Where 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

The major constraints were centered on navigating complex regulations and accountability requirements.

The National Park Service currently offers a variety of partnership training courses for employees and collaborators to assist in partnership development and management, and this research provides valuable baseline data to help understand the partnership culture. Results from both phases of this study are helping staff of the NPS Mather and Albright training centers to better understand the relationship between the Park Service and its many partners. In fall 2005, the National Park Service hired a training manager specifically for partnerships and collaborative work. Based on the competency gaps revealed in this and the 2007 study, the National Park Service has focused its attention on developing curricula (online and residential training, job aids and templates, regional workshops, webinars, and resource lists) to assist NPS employees and partners in forging and sustain-

ing strong NPS partnerships. Further partnership research can continue to guide the training process as the partnership culture changes and adapts to future challenges.

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Table 2. Strength of selected partnership motivations and constraints

Partnership Motivations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean¹
Partnerships lead to greater innovation and effectiveness	0	0	1.2	8.3	9.5	31	50	6.20
Partnerships with others (public, private, not-for-profit, or government organizations) can lead to better management decisions	1.2	0	2.4	9.6	9.6	31.3	45.8	6.04
Partnerships give others a better understanding of my organization and its mission	0	0	7.2	9.6	15.7	24.1	43.4	5.87
Partnerships improve communications among organizations, making it easier to deal with problems	0	0	4.8	11.9	16.7	32.1	34.5	5.80
Partnerships expand my organization's capacity for leadership because decisions are influenced by people with different perspectives	2.4	0	2.4	13.1	11.9	35.7	34.5	5.77
Partnerships result in more constructive, less adversarial attitudes among stakeholders	0	6.2	11.1	13.6	8.6	28.4	32.1	5.38
Partnerships allow the pooling of resources, thus saving time and money for each partner	1.2	7.2	9.6	12	20.5	25.3	24.1	5.16
Partnerships result in better coordination of policies/practices of multiple stakeholders	0	4.9	8.5	20.7	19.5	30.5	15.9	5.10
Partnership Constraints	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean¹
I am frequently challenged to find flexibility within the NPS's rules and policies regarding partnering	6.2	9.9	11.1	16	17.3	19.8	19.8	4.67
As accountability requirements within the NPS increase, it makes partnering increasingly complex and difficult	3.7	12.2	9.8	18.3	25.6	14.6	15.9	4.57
Partnerships with the NPS lead to a power struggle among the participants	13.3	26.5	12.0	21.7	8.4	9.6	8.4	3.48
Entering into partnerships with the NPS is just too difficult because of governmental bureaucratic processes and regulations	17.1	22	12.2	14.6	18.3	12.2	3.7	3.46
I am uncomfortable with the mistrust that accompanies establishing and maintaining partnerships	26.5	31.3	10.8	18.1	9.6	2.4	1.2	2.65

¹Where 7 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree

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