Kirtland’s Warbler vs. Brown-Headed Cow Bird: The Recreation and Sport Management Debate Continues

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In 2008, a position paper was published in Schole: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education. The authors Daniel Dustin and Keri Schwab used the analogy of the brown-headed cow bird to represent sport management (a bird that invades and takes over the nest of the Kirtland’s Warbler, i.e. recreation) to explain what tends to happen to recreation programs when sport management programs are taken “under the wing” of recreation departments. A series of response papers were sought from primarily recreation scholars, however the contribution of sport management scholars to the debate was minimal. This session is designed to expose sport management educators to this debate and to provide a forum for discussion. A series of three papers will present an overview of the original debate, a vision of shared points of contact from a sport management point of view, and a critical response to the continued points of dissimilarity between the two fields from a recreation view point. The audience will be provided with time to question and debate the issues proffered by the three panelists.

Paper one entitled, Consider the Kirtland’s Warbler: An overview of the Debate raises a number of questions including, a) are parks and recreation (P & R) departments providing temporary homes for sport management programs? And b) if so, are they contributing to the ultimate demise of P & R programs? Drawing upon interviews with both recreation and sport management educators and the sport management literature the authors argue that there are a number of difficulties facing departments where the two programs coexist including the need for P & R faculty to “retool” to incorporate sport management content into their classes and dealing with students who typically see themselves as having different professional goals, despite the fact that many sport management students ultimately end up working in P & R departments. The authors draw upon Challadurai’s (1992) observation that sport can be viewed in two ways, as a human service which is more akin to the philosophy of traditional P & R and sport as entertainment which fits more closely with the viewpoint of many sport management educators. While, the second panelist points to the idea of sport as a human service as a potential point of contact between the two fields, the authors point to Challadurai’s (1992) conclusion that these are “two drastically different enterprises” (p. 7).

Paper two entitled, Enabling Cross-Leverage: Bringing the Sport Management and Recreation Management Fields Together responds to the arguments put forth in the series of papers published in Schole 2008 and provides a blueprint for a shared vision for the future of recreation and sport management. The author contends that recent debates regarding the academic relationship between sport management and recreation management have concluded that sport management does not integrate well with recreation management, and vice versa. The conclusion derives from narrow concerns with protection of academic turf, rather than the development of a vibrant community of scholarly research and discourse. Recreation management and sport management have developed an array of complementary realms of inquiry that remain inadequately informed by one another because the two have remained largely separated in the academic community. In fact, the two disciplines share a common handicap which derives from the lower status associated with the study of play. However, their shared focus on play is potentially a source of advantage as play (and playfulness) can be used as tools for policy intervention. For example, sport organizations, such as the NFL and the USOC, have endeavored to become involved in the national health agenda, particularly with reference to promotion of physical activity. Indeed, such involvement could render significant funding for sport organizations and for sport management researchers. However, sport has not yet been credible as a health ally, particularly because it has been separated from recreation. Similarly, the separation of sport from recreation has been shown to lead to strategic failures of policy, for example in the creation of sport tourism policies. In particular, the capacity to cross-leverage sport and recreation needs to be better understood, as there are clear psychographic connections that are inadequately understood and therefore inadequately applied. For example, we have so far failed to understand how sport participation and sport spectating might be leveraged to enhance the
development of markets for both. In order to overcome the challenges of working together, we will need to develop a vision for shared research agendas and curricular complementarities. The direction and means for so doing are described.

Paper three entitled Watching Life Pass Us By provides a critical response to the perceived primary focus of US sport management students, that of entertainment and spectator oriented sport, which stands in stark contrast to the potential for a shared vision set out by the second paper. The author suggests that sport management students often find themselves housed in departments of P & R though they seldom identify with, or aspire to, careers in P & R. And when park and recreation educators attempt to teach sport management students based on the assumption that sport management is but a specialized application of more general P & R management principles and practices, students and professors alike are left wanting. What should we do about this situation? Do our two fields of study share enough common ground to build an enduring mutually beneficial relationship, or are we so different in our philosophical foundations that we should separate once and for all? More specifically, do we share a vision of promoting mass sport participation to enhance the health and well being of the citizenry, or are we preoccupied with promoting sport as entertainment, commodifying sport, and contributing to what J. B. Nash referred to as “spectatoritis?” Should we be serving a nation of onlookers, or should we be encouraging a nation of onlookers to play more themselves?