

Examining Counselor Satisfaction in an Outdoor Therapeutic Recreation Camp

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Introduction: Therapeutic camping programs yield many benefits for youth with disabilities (e.g. Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000; Fullerton, Brannan, & Arick, 2000; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003). However, providing programs that foster such benefits are faced with challenges surrounding the retention and recruitment of their staff (Lawrence, Glidden, & Jobe, 2006; Tatsapaugh, 1994). Retention has been reported as negatively correlated with job satisfaction for those who provide direct care to people with disabilities in residential settings. Job satisfaction has been linked to predicting a counselor's return to camp as well (Lawrence et al., 2006). This study examines job satisfaction of counselors in a therapeutic camping program who provide direct care to youth with multiple disabilities (cognitive or physical).

The therapeutic recreation camping program in this study is a component of a service learning class that has been in existence since 1977. This service learning program provides a one week outdoor educational experience for campers where students gain education, awareness, and exposure to people with disabilities. The program is conducted in two phases. Phase one includes classroom and outdoor instruction where the students learn how to organize, develop, implement and evaluate the program. Phase two consists of the implementation of the therapeutic program itself. Each counselor is paired with a camper providing a one-to-one camper-counselor ratio. Additionally, the students work to create a safe, caring, educational, and fun setting which results in an equally relevant educational experience for campers. The purpose of this study was to examine the counselors experience at camp, looking specifically at job satisfaction.

Methods: Participants were enrolled in therapeutic recreation programming course at a university in the Southeast. The course enrollment was 211, and 113 students completed the questionnaire for a 54% response rate. The course was open to students across all disciplines at the university so there were no enrollment restrictions. Levels of job satisfaction were measured using a modified version of the Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) developed by Spector (1985, 1994). The JSS is a 36-item survey that measures nine factors assessing attitudes about the job and aspects of the job. It was originally developed for use in human service organizations but has been used in studies regarding recreation management employees and volunteers (Kaltenbaugh, 2009; Siverberg, Marshall, & Ellis, 2001). There are nine factors within job satisfaction with each measured by a summed score of 4-items. They are (1) pay, (2) promotion, (3) supervision, (4) fringe benefits, (5) contingent rewards, (6) operating condition, (7) coworkers, (8) nature of work, and (9) communication. Participants have six choices per item, anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." Pay and rewards were not part of the camp environment so the statements used to measure the

dimensions of pay, promotion, and fringe benefits were not included in the questionnaire.

Analysis: Cronbach's alpha was used for scale reliability with scores ranging from .54 to .77. Overall scale reliability was .87. One item was deleted within the dimension of operating conditions to increase the reliability of the dimension. Thus, 23 items were used in examining satisfaction. Levels of satisfaction were calculated and interpreted based on the guidelines set forth by Spector (1994).

Results: The respondents were overwhelmingly female with a 3-to-1 female-to-male ratio which mirrored the class demographic breakdown. Only 17.7% of the students were freshman and sophomores and this was the first time taking the class for 69% percent of the respondents. The majority of students (69.1%) as well were outside the major in which the course is housed. The level of satisfaction with the camp experience was extremely high. All six categories had satisfaction ratings above 80% and three were above 95%. The overall satisfaction score was a near 100% of the participants being satisfied. Only, one respondent fell into the ambivalent range.

Implications: The findings indicate that the counselors had a high level of overall job satisfaction which stands to provide possible reasoning as to why students repeat the service learning course. This helps ensure that the service learning program retains trained staff yearly. Additionally, the findings validate that the students are being provided with a valuable experience that is highly satisfying. In return, the students promote the program to their peers making the recruitment process less challenging. This information may be of interest to potential donors to the university who want to fund programs that provide such valuable and rewarding experiences to students or when seeking grant dollars to support educational training. Two factors had more than 14% of the respondents as ambivalent: communication and operating conditions. Such knowledge affords the opportunity to direct efforts of improvement towards these areas specifically. Future research should delve further into examining why this program is so rewarding to the students.

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