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EXAMINING THE COMPLEXITIES OF PARTNERSHIP ADMINISTRATION: INSIGHT INTO THE PROGRAMMATIC CAPACITY OF THE USDA FOREST SERVICE

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Abstract

Partnerships significantly augment the capacity of the USDA Forest Service to care for its lands and serve people using those lands. As part of the agency's recreation program, partners perform diverse services such as trail building, interpretive programming, grant writing, monitoring, and general maintenance. However, the increasingly formal nature of agency partnerships has added administrative complexity to relationships that were once solidified by handshakes. This paper explores the programmatic capacity of recreation partnerships using data from a multi-phased study conducted with agency personnel. The study found that dedicated leadership cultivates vibrant partnership programs. However, agency personnel expressed concern for declining programmatic capacity due to staff turnover, job compression, and outsourcing. Strategies for building programmatic capacity are discussed, including formalizing work with partnerships as an accountable job duty. As reliance on agency partnerships are predicted to increase, the implications section addresses the specific administrative challenges of partnering.

1.0 Introduction

It is a long-standing tradition in the USDA Forest Service to use partnerships to enhance the provision of recreation services and opportunities. However, limited growth in appropriations to the agency, and the recreation program's budget in particular (Collins & Brown 2007), has expanded the diversity of tasks accomplished with partners and increased agency reliance on partnerships as a means for accomplishing mission-critical tasks. Synergy (the ability to accomplish more by pooling resources) is generally the desired outcome of partnerships (Lasker et al. 2001) and the Forest Service recognizes this as a value-added benefit of partnerships. Work performed by agency volunteers—who represent just one type of partner—is estimated to be worth one billion dollars per year (Collins & Brown 2007). Hence, partners are a supplementary workforce enhancing the recreation program's capacity.

Despite enhanced recreation programmatic capacity, the capacity of the agency's partnership program is not well understood. Lauten (2007) states that “while improvement in programmatic capacity is essential, ...[it] must be mirrored with an equivalent build-up in administrative capacity” (p. 6). That is, increases in the number of partnerships do not necessarily lead to accomplishing specific recreation tasks. Rather, ample time, equipment, training, and supervision, as well as agreement process guidance, are required to create and maintain relationships that provide synergistic outcomes.

The creation of a National Partnership Office in 2003 demonstrated the Forest Service's interest in expanding the administrative capacity of its partnership program. However, the federal government's agenda to improve accountability, transparency, and efficiency has increased the administrative burden of partnerships. For example, the agency created the Albuquerque Service Center in 2004 to streamline budgetary and other administrative processes. Yet, Seekamp and Cerveny (2010) found that this centralization has increased the administrative burden of partnerships for some personnel (e.g., longer paperwork processing time, additional steps in paperwork, reduced face-time). Furthermore, the time-intensiveness of partnership administration has not been accounted for in job performance evaluations for agency personnel who work with partnerships on the ground.

Although the Forest Service's partnership program is enhancing the capacity of the agency's recreation program, complexities associated with administering a partnership program may jeopardize the capacity of the agency's partnership program. The purpose of this paper is to further explore the administrative complexities of USDA Forest Service's recreation partnerships. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to identify partnership programmatic capacity determinants and constraints, as well as to elicit suggestions for building the agency's partnership programmatic capacity.

2.0 Methods

In 2007, we began a multi-phased study to better understand how partnerships, as an institutional mechanism, are used to enhance the Forest Service recreation program. Phase I included 15 key informant interviews with agency personnel to develop a conceptual framework of recreation partners. Participants were selected using theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss 2008) to enhance heterogeneity (i.e., multiple regions and administrative levels). During Phase II, we conducted a multiple case study to refine and expand the conceptual framework. Our case selection criteria were based on two factors identified in Phase I as influencing national forests' partnership programs. First, we chose forests based on their "institutional commitment" to partnerships, defined by the presence or absence of a partnership coordinator. Then we looked at the forest's "external environment," namely its proximity to a pool of volunteers. We divided forests into three categories: urban (within 50 miles of a major city), amenity (over 50 miles from a city but with a large population of seasonal residents or amenity migrants); and rural (over 50 miles from a city and without many seasonal residents or amenity migrants). Six national forests were purposively selected based on conversations with regional partnership coordinators. Forest key contacts then provided the names of all forest- and district-level personnel engaged in recreation partnerships, creating a snowball sample (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). In-depth, semi-structured interviews ($n = 44$) were conducted on each forest until theoretical saturation (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) was reached. However, census sampling was conducted for one forest, as theoretical saturation did not occur until all agency personnel engaged in partnerships on the forest were interviewed.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using techniques consistent with a grounded theory research approach (Charmaz 2006). Specifically, we used open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss 2008) to develop and refine themes. Additionally, we used insider peer-debriefing (Spillett 2003) to develop our coding categories and to ensure a consistent interpretive pattern. We compiled Phase I and Phase II data for this paper. Participants are identified by phase number and an arbitrary identification number (e.g., I-2, II-1, II-35).

3.0 Results and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss findings related to the programmatic capacity of the USDA Forest Service's recreation and partnership programs (Table 1).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

3.1 Programmatic Capacity Determinants

In Phase I of the research, participants emphasized that forest-level partnership coordinators increased administrative and programmatic capacity. "A couple of years ago we created a partnership position which is currently vacant, but for a couple of years there was a partnership coordinator on the forest and that is when we really had lots of partnerships" (I-11). We interpreted this and similar statements to mean that having a forest-level partnership coordinator indicates institutional commitment to a partnership program. This then led us to use the presence or absence of a designated partnership coordinator position as a criterion for case selection in Phase II. However, we found that job compression is currently changing the nature of many positions. Partnership coordinators often have multiple duties and shared duties that may include public relations and communication, and people in these positions can spend as little as ten percent of their time building and maintaining partnerships. Ultimately, we found that leadership that is dedicated to partnerships (i.e., forest supervisors and district rangers who create partnership initiatives) is a better indicator of programmatic capacity than designated partnership coordinator positions.

I think that [it's] leadership on the district [that] really sets the tone for all of us [emphasizing] how important, not just getting the work done [is] but in building and maintaining and cultivating new relationships in the community. When the primary staff [tell us] how it is a priority to build and develop and maintain these relationships, it is clear communication for all of us [about] how important that is for the whole district to function properly and get as much done as we can. (II-32)

Our interviews confirmed that the external environment of a forest is closely correlated with the capacity of both recreation and partnership programs. In terms of partnership program capacity, we found that access to a stable and dedicated partnership base (especially areas with a strong volunteer culture) meant more robust partnership programs. For example, a participant explained how facilities are kept open longer than budgeted because of dedicated volunteers: "This is what [volunteers] think, that [a specific recreation area] should be open from April to November, [but] what we have funding for is May to September. So, they're willing to pick up the slack just to make it happen just the way they think it should happen, which is a dedicated host" (II-4). This trend appears to be strongly influenced by the commitment of forest and district-level leaders to building a strong partnership program.

3.2 Programmatic Capacity Constraints

Our results confirmed several assumptions regarding agency partnership program capacity constraints. First, our participants painted a dire picture of the recreation programs' ability to maintain facilities and provide visitor services, making partnership program administration that much more challenging.

I think in terms of the unit as a whole, watching federal budgets go down and the way things are happening, we are starting to realize [that] if we are going to achieve what was envisioned in the legislation, then we are going to have to devote that time to partnerships. We are going to have to be seeking them out. We are going to have to look for new ways to develop and implement partnerships for us. It is just going to be a matter of survival. (I-5)

Second, we found these constraints to be linked to the elimination of some recreation positions and the compression of job duties, as well as to a decrease in motivation and reluctance to start new partnerships. “So the partnership deal is just another part of the puzzle of adding more work to an already strapped workforce because it’s bringing in more work” (II-8). Third, we found that the formalization of partnerships throughout the agency leads to increased paperwork that is challenging for both agency personnel and new partners to navigate. “One of the things I see with field staff, is a process of just getting a partner engaged as far as just paperwork. The internal bureaucracy that it takes to get approval for those kinds of things can discourage somebody pretty quickly” (I-13).

Our study also revealed unanticipated insights related to a recreation workforce that is being replaced with either volunteer or contracted labor. Specifically, agency personnel expressed concern that the institutional memory of the agency’s recreation program is declining with the loss of “seasoned” recreation technicians.

Basically what is shifting is [that] the expertise of these groups is exceeding Forest Service expertise. They are able to teach our employees now. We send our employees to their training. That trust is shifting as these guys build their safety and the detailed understanding of the projects (II-41).

Another related concern was the loss of agency identity as a recreation provider. “You know you lose that Forest Service feel. It’s just more impersonal. People are going to see fewer and fewer, they already are, [seeing] fewer and fewer green uniforms. Green vehicles aren’t even there anymore; it’s more of an impersonal feel” (I-8). This change was also related to concerns about variable service quality between sites, districts, and national forests.

It’s true that people don’t see the Forest Service out as much as they used to in the past. Campgrounds are a little bit different. So sometimes we do hear that, “The Forest Service wouldn’t do this” or “They’re just not doing a good job, you’re letting them take over the Forest Service.” But, I think it’s a mixed bag and when the Forest Service did [these tasks] we had our own problems and people just tend to forget that. (II-40)

Participants in our study also expressed concern about the projected increase in reliance on partnerships, specifically overdependence on partners and a loss of power. “I think partners will help but if we can’t do things on our own, we may become more beholden to other outside groups, meaning like state and local [groups], and they’re going to be able to exert more pressure on us to do things their way, which may be a detriment to our mission: conservation” (II-19). Other concerns included the inability to further expand current partnership programs and, conversely, the instability of partnerships when personnel with strong partnership ties retire or move to another forest. “I often wonder whether we’re at capacity with partners and that hasn’t been my experience on other forests” (II-34). Another participant expressed similar concerns, but more specifically the ineffectiveness of partnerships without adequate time to devote to them:

Within the unit, just really the culture that we have here values partnerships. Personally, we all get pretty tired sometimes and we do not want another partnership to walk in the door. I want to ‘do right’ by the ones that I have on my desk right now, rather than [feel that] I am not excited when three more walk in the door. How are we going to balance our time? But, internally, I say our culture is very high on partnerships. (I-5)

Other participants expressed concern that continued agency reliance on partnerships will further reduce recreation program appropriations.

Well, there’s always the concern that Congress will reward us by reducing our funding. So, that’s always a concern. We would hope that our funding would stay the same or increase so we would have more funds to use elsewhere [such as] where we can’t use partners or we’re not likely to get partners. It’s hard to get partners to clean toilets. And so, we have to find a way to clean toilets, and so sometimes you just have to hire somebody to do that. (II-28)

These concerns were woven together well in relation to programmatic capacity by another participant: “If anything, I’d have to say that there has been an increased emphasis, but not an increased capability. [There has been] more

encouragement to make it work, more encouragement to make volunteers work, but no ability to really implement the program to really make it work well” (I-13).

3.3 Building Programmatic Capacity

Our participants provided numerous suggestions for building the capacity of partnerships and, hence, the recreation programs. Rewards, incentives, and formalizing partnership administration as an accountable duty were suggested ways to enhance personnel motivation and engagement in partnerships. “If you could build some incentives [for] programs who use partnerships to reward those units or programs that are using them a lot. But [also] to increase capabilities, so where it’s not a negative impact on your program to go do this” (II-25). Another participant explained that small incentives need to be integrated with job performance reviews.

Yeah, peer ‘spot awards’ where the person who recognizes or sees that you’re working with partners. [You] can do like a \$50 peer spot award. Or, you can get a nonmonetary award, something like this [points to FS bag] that we’ve gotten just recently. And, I think, if I’m not mistaken, it’s a part of our evaluations, I think that’s one of them. But, it’s not a critical element, which I think it should be a critical element as far as our evaluations. (II-15)

Other suggestions included consistency in partnership coordinator position duties and streamlined partnership reporting. Some participants suggested that partnership coordinators should focus on strategic partnership development, which may be more effective at the district level where the on-the-ground work is performed.

4.0 Implications

The USDA Forest Service’s recreation program is affected by the reality of fiscal constraints. In response, the agency has amplified its partnership program to provide recreation services and maintain recreation facilities. However, developing and overseeing partnerships are clearly extra duties (Seekamp & Cerveny 2010) and this research documents the challenges of administering a partnership program. Job compression and personnel turnover are challenges to enduring relationships with agency partners. Furthermore, these challenges are confounded by loss of institutional memory and increased formalization of partnership agreements, which may change a once-technical workforce into one of partnership coordinators, paper-pushers, and project supervisors.

Study findings suggest ways to enhance a national forest’s recreation program through partnerships. Forest leaders could develop a vibrant partnership culture by treating partnerships as an administrative priority. In other words, rather than assuming, as we incorrectly did, that having a designated partnership coordinator indicates a thriving partnership program, leaders could create an atmosphere in which personnel are more motivated to develop and maintain partnerships. Fostering a partnership culture will likely require leaders to emphasize the importance of partnerships and promote strategies for creative partnership engagement. For example, partnership programmatic capacity may be enhanced by incentives and rewards, providing additional motivation to engage partners. However, incentives and rewards alone may not be sufficient, as the time and energy required to develop and administer partnerships are formidable. Formalizing partnerships as an accountable job duty may further facilitate a vibrant partnership culture.

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Table 1. Determinants and constraints to programmatic capacity

Capacity	Recreation Program	Partnership Program
<i>Determinants</i>		
Institutional commitment	Appropriations	Administrative priority
External environment	Amenity resources	Stable volunteer culture
<i>Constraints</i>		
Process/paperwork		Red tape
Institutional memory	Loss of 'seasoned' technicians	Personnel turnover
Job compression	Inability to manage sites	Ineffective partnerships
"Outsourcing"	Loss of agency identity	Overdependence
	Decreased "quality"	Loss of power
	Increased liability	