

From Volunteer Management to Citizen Engagement: Lessons from Dufferin Grove Park



Erin Sharpe
Dept. of Recreation and
Leisure Studies
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

Learning Objectives

- **To critically assess traditional volunteer management practices in terms of their potential to foster community engagement;**
- **To consider alternative approaches for working with people in the community;**
- **To create a Top 5 priority list of current practices that could be revised to further foster community engagement.**

Volunteer Management vs. Community Engagement

- **Volunteer Management:** Refers to a systematic approach to organizing volunteers that often mirrors employee management frameworks.
 - Tied to practices of recruitment, selection, hiring, screening, training, termination.
- **Community Engagement:** Sustained, productive, and meaningful participation of the community in recreation.
 - Focus on getting people involved, opening doors, making it easy!

Community Engagement in Action: Dufferin Grove Park, Toronto

- **A 14.2 acre park in downtown Toronto**
 - **Full schedule of regular and special events**
 - **Regular and innovative amenities and programs**
 - **Nationally and internationally recognized for community engagement**
- **Meaningful, productive, and sustained involvement:**
 - **High community participation in events**
 - **Friday night suppers, festival events – very well attended**
 - **High community collaboration in programming**
 - **Two paid casual/part-time park staff; all other productivity from non-park staff**
 - **Wide range of involvement - ‘full-time’ to one-time; regular and seasonal**

From Organization to Network

- **Community members organized into ‘Friends of the Park,’ however this group remained very informal.**
 - **No Board of Directors, designated roles, or meetings - “like a network of friends.”**
 - **“Anyone can be a Friend of the Park.”**
- **Heavy use of network-based communications.**
 - **Newsletter posted in park, e-mail, website!**
- **Social events acted as a feedback loop.**
 - **Informal and social interaction helped to recruit people for projects, solve problems, communicate with staff.**
- **Result: Openness to participation.**

From Volunteer to Vocation

- **Community involved in meaningful, relevant work**
 - Tied to skill development, personal interest, value of civic participation, leadership, identity
 - Running farmer's market, building cob structure, running a summer theatre company
- **Participation not only voluntary - economic benefits!**
 - Earned income through grants, contracts, pass the hat, sales at market
 - Other 'in-kind' exchanges - child care, education, work for food
 - The dichotomies of paid/volunteer and self-interest/benevolence broken down

Result: Lifestyle compatibility

From Control to Autonomy

- **The community, not the city, set the agenda for the work of the community.**
 - Friends involved in programming, planning, fundraising, administration
 - Park staff took on a facilitative role.
- **Fostered by financial autonomy.**
 - Fundraising allowed Friends to contract people to work on community initiatives
- **Result: Ownership**
 - “We are the ‘eyes and ears’ of the park”
 - Strong advocates, much ‘political capital’

Volunteer Management and Community Engagement Questions

- **How extensive is the traditional volunteer management approach in parks and recreation?**
 - **Where does this come from?**
- **Should volunteers be treated as de-facto employees or should they be approached differently?**
 - **What are the advantages and disadvantages of the traditional approach?**
- **Do you have examples that relate to openness, compatibility, and ownership from your agency?**
- **Are there other factors that are important that were not covered in this list?**

Critical Assessment of Volunteer Management Policies and Practices

- **Review the volunteer management policy of Blue Lake Recreation Association.**
- **What are some 'red flags' impacting community engagement?**
- **How could this policy be revised to foster greater openness, autonomy, and lifestyle compatibility?**



For More Information

- **Erin Sharpe**
 - Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
 - Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario
 - Email: erin.sharpe@brocku.ca
- **Dufferin Grove Park**
 - Friends of Dufferin Grove Park website:
 - <http://dufferinpark.ca/>