Careers in Parks and Recreation

Opportunities for employment in the recreation and leisure services are broad and diverse. Since recreation depends upon individual attitudes, resources, financial capabilities, and educational awareness, recreation experiences are as numerous as human interests and needs. The formalized settings that are typically established for recreation and leisure include local, state, and federal government agencies, quasi-public agencies, industrial or employee recreation, military recreation, and private or commercial recreation. Each of these settings are discussed below (adapted from the AALR).

Local Government Agencies

Professionals in this area work under city, county, or regional park and/or recreation departments. The professional may work as an administrator, supervisor, center or special facility manager, leader and staff positions such as planner, business manager, operations analyst and administrative assistant. The primary purpose of local government recreation agency is to provide a variety of positive leisure experiences for all segments of the population within the area of the governmental jurisdiction. The entry level position for a person with a bachelor’s degree and limited experience is usually at the supervisory level.

State and Federal Government

The two major areas of employment with state and federal government agencies are outdoor recreation resources and institutions serving special populations. Other areas may include tourism, university campus recreation or college union management.

Outdoor recreation opportunities are found primarily with land managing agencies such as state and national parks, forests, wildlife areas and water resources. Entry level positions in these agencies include naturalists, historical interpreters, park rangers, assistant property managers and outdoor recreation planners. Emphasis is placed on providing recreation opportunities as well as conserving and properly utilizing the natural environment.

State and federal agencies serving special populations include hospitals, prisons, correctional institutions, mental health centers, rehabilitation centers and schools for individuals with mental or physical disabilities. Persons trained in therapeutic recreation work with people in these environments. Their role is to function as agents for social, emotional and physical changes in the clients by providing opportunities through recreation, cultural, social and daily living skills. Those seeking recreation therapy positions must complete a specialized program in this field at a four-year college along with obtaining certification.

Youth Serving Agencies

Quasi-public agencies include YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated, 4-H Clubs, Campfires Incorporated and religious agencies. These organizations provide recreation as well as other important services to children, youth, adults and family groups. Those trained in recreation and leisure services may work in a variety of settings including camps, YMCA-YWCA buildings, sports facilities, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated club buildings, community centers and county and state fair facilities.
Industrial or Employee Recreation

Many industrial organizations have recreation programs for employees and their dependents. Programs and facilities are very similar to those sponsored by a municipal park and recreation department including sports, outdoor recreation, social events, cultural arts, travel and tour programs and special events. The norms for professional qualifications and working conditions are less defined in this area of recreation employment than in many others. Further information may be obtained from the National Employees services Recreation Association, 2400 S. Downing, Westchester, IL 60153

Military Recreation

Recreational programs which are operated, maintained, and funded as an integral part of the personnel program of the Department of Defense, are designed to improve the quality of life, productivity, and retention within the military. These positions are filled by a combination of military and civilian personnel with some of the positions being identified as civil service jobs. Employment opportunities are available at military bases in the U.S. as well as in a number of foreign countries. Types of positions include base recreation director, recreation center director, outdoor recreation specialists, program director, aquatics and youth specialists, athletic director and community recreation specialists.

Private and Commercial Recreation

The commercial recreation service/sales field has become one of the fastest growing segments of the total recreation industry. Private recreation may be operated on a profit as well as a non-profit basis such as the case with country clubs, swim clubs, athletic clubs, health clubs, tennis and racquetball clubs, dance clubs, hobby clubs, and any other special interest groups. Also, housing developments may employ recreation graduates to conduct organized programs and manage recreation facilities.

The term "commercial" recreation is used to distinguish those enterprises which are operated with a profit motive. These include amusement parks, bowling areas, ski resorts, marinas, racetracks and a variety of other tourist attractions. Persons wishing to enter the private and commercial recreation field should have some preparation in business related skills as well as in recreation programming and administration.