

Student Self-Management through Contract Administration

Lee J. deLisle Ph.D.

Western Michigan University

Introduction

As undergraduate students approach the end of their academic careers we may wonder about their capability to 'make it in the real world'. One would hope that each student has retained a sufficient amount of pertinent information and developed adequate management skills so that they achieve success in the workplace. It is imperative that students leave school not only informed but confident of their abilities. Of critical importance in this process is the ever-elusive ability to manage oneself. Success in the classroom as indicated by meeting deadlines, learning and synthesizing new material, effectively communicating with peers and instructors, and learning the value of individual and group achievement are all indicators of potential for greater things. A senior level management course provides a perfect opportunity for both student and teacher to implement the accumulated knowledge of four (or more) years of study, and to realistically assess one's real life management skills.

Our senior level management course, *Advanced Applications of Recreational Management*, is designed to allow the student to assess their strengths and weaknesses, to design their own coursework, to enhance their strengths, experience success, and to make improvements to areas that are perceived to be less than adequate.

Description of the Activity

The students are presented with the opportunity to select readings, service learning projects, volunteer experiences, oral and written presentations, attendance at state and regional conferences, participation in local park and recreation commission meetings, conduct facility evaluations, technology projects and other activities that will serve to enhance their skill inventory. Course options are selected from skills identified in the NRPA curriculum guidelines and compliment skills and information acquired in earlier courses.

Initially, the students attend lectures on contract management and then must devise a contract that describes the tasks that they choose to accomplish during the semester. The students also propose the compensation (grade) they feel that their activities will deserve at the end of the semester. The intention is to fully integrate the process of contract management into the learning experience. While the concept of contracting for a grade is not new to academia, most students indicate that they have not had this opportunity during their college years. Students are encouraged to select activities that will enhance their management capabilities, increase their knowledge, expand their experience, and refine their skills. Students perform a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of their present management skills and experiences in order to aid them in defining their course objectives.

The contract necessitates the development of a negotiation strategy in order to receive appropriate compensation for their efforts. Students may negotiate the number of assignments to be completed, opportunities for extra credit, point totals for homework, quizzes, tests and special projects, they also determine an allowable number of excused

and unexcused absences, and any other tasks that both the student and teacher agree would be beneficial to their development. In addition to the tasks chosen by the students, the professor provides materials in weekly lectures that constitute the background for additional readings, in class assessments and extracurricular activities.

Material and Costs

Currently all students are required to read The Rise of the Creative Class by Richard Florida. This assignment is not negotiable as it provides a framework for many of the lectures and class discussions. Students must also select a number of readings from journals such as Harvard Business Review, SCHOLE, Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, Parks and Recreation, Human Resource Management and others that may meet their particular needs. Students are required to attend an agreed upon number of community parks and recreation commission or other significant meetings requiring prior contact with the chosen agency and securing a means of transportation to the meeting. Students must travel to recreational facilities to tour and report upon their experience. Students are also encouraged to attend a professional conference lasting one to three days in an area of particular interest to them. In most cases the fees are minimal if the students agree to volunteer at the event.

Intended Outcomes

The following outcomes are discussed with the students prior to beginning the project:

Cognitive

Through class lectures by the instructor and presentations by classmates, the students are expected to assimilate new information in the areas of contract and project management, conflict resolution, negotiation skills, progressive discipline, employee motivation, risk management and legal liability, budget analysis, issues of diversity, website evaluation, and the completion of a professional electronic portfolio.

Management

The underlying premise of this approach is to support and guide the students through a very real management challenge. The students must accurately identify the resources needed to successfully complete their project. Students must identify all stakeholders in their project and adequately meet the needs and expectations of each party. Effective management depends on a realistic vision, a full commitment of resources, and the ability to adjust and adapt to unforeseen circumstances that challenge success. The students experience these elements of management and are encouraged to share their discoveries in class.

Problem Solving

The students are directed to identify current issues/problems confronted by professionals in the field of recreational services. Problems are found through the NRPA e-communities threads, topical materials in the NRPA publication Parks and Recreation and through additional media sources. Students are encouraged to fully research one or more issues of interest in order to provide useful information/solutions and opinions on the chosen topic. The students are encouraged to contact the original author or source of the topics in order to learn more about the issue and potentially provide new information to the author. Students then explain their motivation for choosing the topic, and present their experience and findings to the class.

Negotiation Skills

Students must develop and implement a selected course of study based on a realistic self-assessment and academic standards discussed in the class. Students must achieve a win-win strategy that satisfies their desired level of work with the expectations of the instructor and accurately reflect this in their contract. The negotiation process may take several weeks before a mutually agreed upon course of action is realized. This is a critical stage of the experience.

Diversity Awareness/ Social Skills

Students will spend a considerable amount of time in service learning experiences, volunteer activities with local agencies with diverse populations, and at community meetings. For some students it is their first experience interacting with local governments and agencies allowing for an expansion of their concept of citizenry, public service and community. Students are reminded of their role as a representative of the university and are encouraged to observe appropriate social and business protocols.

Technical Skills

The students improve their proficiency in the use of computer-based skills through various classroom presentations. The students may also present a critique of park and recreation websites found online in order to improve their critical abilities in developing effective electronic media. The students also are encouraged to diversify and improve their writing skills by choosing different types of writing styles in their reports. Executive summaries, news reports, personal reflections, marketing and advertising copy, and journal entries are possible styles appropriate to many of the assignments. Well-planned oral presentations are emphasized as a critical element of excellent managerial communications.

Record Keeping

Students create and maintain an electronic spreadsheet of all contract requirements. Students must record dates of all submittals, the status of all work in progress, and must reconcile their records with the instructor on a quarterly basis.

Observations

Many students are excited at the possibility of deciding their own fate in the class. Initially they assume that a relatively insignificant amount of work will merit high compensation. Through the process of contract negotiation, the students realize that the workload may, in fact, be greater than many of their previous classes.

Some students exhibit fear and frustration at having to be responsible for the choices that they will ultimately make. This can result in unrealistic goals setting strategies that require assistance from the instructor.

Initially a majority of the students do not write a useable contract. This is a critical technical writing experience for them. They come to understand that all decisions made for the remainder of the semester must be represented in the contract. When a student has a question about coursework the mantra is “What does it say in your contract?”

The students also learn the importance of escape clauses, contract re-openers and other important contract management strategies. The historically successful students tend to

make realistic contract choices that take into account responsibilities they have in addition to this class.

The students must set their own timetable for submitting written work, arranging class time for presentations, and scheduling offsite visits. The response to these demands varies from those who regularly submit work on a weekly basis and accurately record their progress, to those who typically engage in crisis management during the last quarter of the semester. Those who plan appropriately may find themselves with very few outside tasks during the last quarter of the semester, much to the chagrin of those who were not so vigilant. A few are rewarded with having accumulated sufficient points and experiences that they are exempt from the final exam, depending on their contract language. Others have failed the course due to their inability to uphold their contractual commitments. The problem is generally one of time/task management.

The more creative students frequently add requirements for the professor in the contract. These may include a specified turn around time for the correction of papers, engaging the professor in activities such as snowboarding, buying students pizza for early completion of all tasks, and weekly student/teacher conferences. In this way the student begins to realize the bilateral aspects and benefits of contract negotiation and execution.

Suggestions

Depending on past experience, the students will require varying amounts of time and personal attention in order to successfully create a workable contract. If students earnestly approach the project, they will choose to nurture existing skills and strengthen those areas that need improvement. For example, one somewhat shy student with above average writing skills elected to do a minimal amount of writing while choosing a high number of oral class presentations. This is to be encouraged and fully supported.

It is important to remind the students of the importance of establishing a manageable timeframe in order to complete all the assignments chosen. Many written assignments may require revisions and will need additional time. The students must also plan class time for any presentations they have elected to complete. Time slots are allotted on a first come first served basis and require a one-week advance reservation.

A variation on this approach would be to allow students to form two or three person teams to accomplish the requirements of their contract. Teamwork challenges the management skills of an individual and requires the development of group cohesiveness and shared responsibility. It is a positive way to encourage mature thinking and cooperative behavior.

Should the prospect of conducting an entire semester using this method seem daunting, it is possible to interject this strategy during a quarter or half of a particular semester or to implement the strategy for a particular project or assignment.

It has proven to be a meaningful, growth experience for students and an alternative and very effective means of assessing competencies for the instructor.