

## ABSTRACT

WHITLOW, MATTHEW BENNETT. Evaluation of The National Association of State Park Directors' State Park Leadership School. (Under the direction of Aram Attarian.)

The National Association of State Park Directors' (NASPD) State Park Leadership School (SPLS) has been providing leadership development training to America's state park personnel since its inception in 2007. The two-year curriculum was designed to deliver nine essential core-competencies necessary to successfully lead and preserve America's state parks. These core-competencies are delivered through a blended learning environment, incorporating both distance and on-site learning. This research utilized results from an on-line post-program evaluation administered during 2012-2013 to a subset of SPLS graduates (n=79). The purpose of the study was to: (1) ensure the mission and goals of the SPLS were being met; and (2) to assess and evaluate the survey instrument and administration methodology.

Almost three fourths of SPLS graduates were male (73%). Eighty-one percent reported receiving a college degree or higher. Forty-two percent were 34-40 years of age (M=41 years). When asked to identify their management level, the majority (65%) identified themselves as lower management. Additionally, these graduates have been working in America's state parks for more than 15 years on average.

Nine qualitative questions were coded into collaboratively developed categories, and four questions were coded based on individual responses. Results suggested the majority of graduates (85%) implemented new practices as a result of participating in the SPLS.

Graduates indicated the SPLS was useful to them primarily in enhancing Personal Development, and provided beneficial opportunities for Networking and improved their Park Operations. Respondents also noted they implemented new practices in the areas of Park Operations and Visitor Relations. When asked if graduation from the SPLS made a difference in one's job, over three fourths (78%) responded "Yes". Overall, results suggested that the SPLS was successful in achieving its mission and goals through delivery of a competency based leadership training program.

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Evaluation of The National Association of State Park Directors'  
State Park Leadership School

by  
Matthew Bennett Whitlow

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APPROVED BY:

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Gene Brothers

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Jordan Smith

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Aram Attarian  
Chair of Advisory Committee

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to my amazing family, who continually provides love, encouragement and support. This would not have been possible without your constant belief in me.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Matthew Whitlow is a graduate student at North Carolina State University. He is working on his Master of Natural Resources degree and a Graduate Certificate in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). As a graduate student at NC State, Mr. Whitlow served as a representative on multiple university-level boards, including serving as the Treasurer & University Graduate Student Association Representative for NC State's Sustainability Fund. He also serves as the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Graduate Student Association Representative to the University's Graduate Student Association. Mr. Whitlow completed his Bachelor of Science in Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management in August, 2013, graduating Summa Cum Laude. He was involved in multiple student groups as an undergraduate, including Rho Phi Lambda, where he served as the Treasurer. Mr. Whitlow aspires to use his education and experience as he transitions into his career as a leader in recreation and natural resource management, where he can help to provide sustainable recreation opportunities for everyone to enjoy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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all supported me in your own ways. I am thankful for having gone through this process together and I look forward to being friends and colleagues into the future.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years there has been significant growth and interest in organizational leadership development programs due to the widely accepted understanding that effective leadership is a key component to organizational success (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). Leadership development, according to McCauley, Moxley and Van Velsor (1998), is defined as expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes. Leadership practices and training programs can vary drastically between public and private organizations, and fewer decent leadership training options exist for public sector agencies (Orazi, Turrini, & Valotti, 2013). One such leadership development program that helps fill this gap and provides the topic of this paper is the National Association of State Park Director's – State Park Leadership School (SPLS). Within state park settings, many park managers receive varying amounts of formal and informal training, and are equipped with knowledge based on their individual experiences in one or more park management settings. However, many park managers have not been exposed to formal, multi-dimensional leadership training. For this reason, the SPLS was created and strategically designed to provide leaders of America's state parks with “core-competencies that are crucial for effectiveness as a professional state park manager”, and to “network with other park professional from all over the country for the ongoing exchange of knowledge, ideas, information, and experiences” (Attarian & Hoffbeck, 2008, p. 4). The result is a new cohort of state park employees with formal training and resources to become successful state park leaders. A key component to

providing successful programs is to have graduating cohorts provide the SPLS Board of Regents with guidance and direction through completing participant course evaluations. This research focuses on results from a post-training evaluation completed by graduates from the first two years of the SPLS. The results from post-training evaluation will be used to help direct the SPLS into the future by providing data to the school so the outcomes of the training program can be better understood. These results can help steer the curriculum to better assure the participants are leaving with thorough understanding of state park managers' roles and work processes.

## BACKGROUND

During the inception of the SPLS in 2007, the founding State Park Directors identified nine essential core-competencies required to successfully lead America's state parks. Each of the identified core-competencies include multiple subcategories (see Appendix A for the expanded list of core-competencies), and the subcategories specifically drive the SPLS' curriculum development. Today, the core-competency categories remain the same, however, the subcategories have evolved and reflect updated topics, including current and predicted park trends and training demands. The curriculum is administered through many types of learning methods, and contain specific themes and goals for each course (Table 1) (NASPD, 2015). The curriculum development and delivery design fits a modified competency-based leadership model (Simpson, 2012; Lado & Wilson, 1994), where the competencies are the key ingredients for the overall training and expected outcomes (Figure 1).

Table 1. State Park Leadership School's Core-Competencies & Course Examples

Competency	Competency Example	Course Goal
1. Philosophy and Planning	Customer Service	To strengthen one's understanding of the power and importance of establishing a customer service culture that results in devoted customers that love and support your mission.
2. Resource Management (Natural and Cultural)	Introduction to Resource Management	To review the many natural and cultural resources located in state parks and to increase understanding and appreciation of park staff roles and responsibilities for stewardship of those resources entrusted to them.
3. Administration	Trends Affecting State Park Management	Increase student's understanding and awareness of trends in various areas affecting parks and recreation.
4. Personnel Development & Management	Employee Relations	How to take charge and manage park employees.
5. Situational Leadership	Conflict Resolution	Increase understanding of conflict and why it occurs between park agencies and the public.
6. Community Relations	Community Relations for State Parks	Provide insight into the importance of maintaining good community relations and information on maintaining positive area relationships.
7. Visitor Services	Law Enforcement and Visitor Protection	Maintain the balance of resource protection and visitor experiences.
8. Interpretative and Education Program Management	Interpretation and Education Services	Understand the meaning of interpretation, its history and applicable methods, and the significance of interpretation in park management.
9. Maintenance	Planning and Organizing Park Maintenance Activities	Introduce the benefits and values of a systematic approach to park maintenance activities and to encourage development and implementation of a maintenance management system.

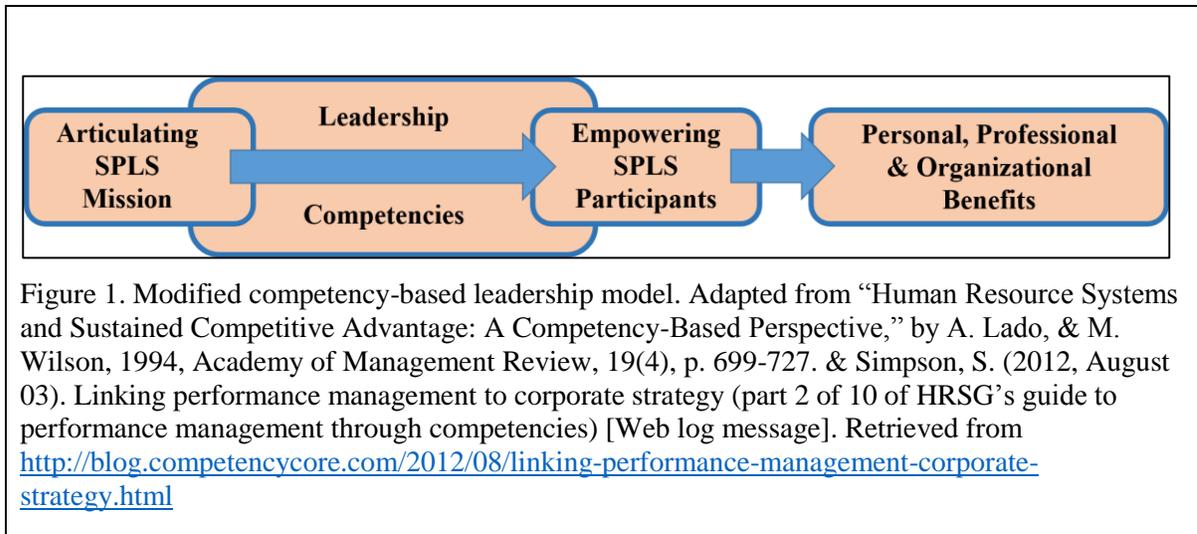


Figure 1. Modified competency-based leadership model. Adapted from “Human Resource Systems and Sustained Competitive Advantage: A Competency-Based Perspective,” by A. Lado, & M. Wilson, 1994, *Academy of Management Review*, 19(4), p. 699-727. & Simpson, S. (2012, August 03). Linking performance management to corporate strategy (part 2 of 10 of HRSG’s guide to performance management through competencies) [Web log message]. Retrieved from <http://blog.competencycore.com/2012/08/linking-performance-management-corporate-strategy.html>

The School’s *mission* is to enhance the development of professional leaders in the protection, operation, and administration of America’s state parks (Attarian, 2014).

Furthermore, the *goals* of the SPLS are for each graduate to:

1. Successfully study, understand and retain the core-competencies needed to operate parks;
2. Be knowledgeable of the history, traditions, trends, and operational challenges of America’s state park systems;
3. Learn from an experienced cadre of career professionals drawn from the various state park systems with each rotating into and off of the Board of Regents in a systematic manner to provide career experience, ethnic and geographic diversity;

4. Establish career lasting networks with peers from other state park systems and Canadian jurisdictions to share knowledge and experiences and to discuss issues, resolutions, and ideas of common interest.

The SPLS is designed as a two-year blended training program that consists of distance education (DE) and on-site training. The material covered in the year one program is designed to provide first year participants with the knowledge on the core-competencies required to be an effective state park leader. Participants are encouraged to incorporate these competencies into their normal practices as much as possible. The material presented in year two is a continuation of year one and is intended to further develop previously learned and applied topics. The entire curriculum is developed and delivered by a Board of Regents that consists of current and former state park directors and senior state park staff.

The blended learning environment provides participants with the flexibility to learn at their own pace, but also requires them to engage in interactive social, relational, and developmental processes, both of which are essential to a successful leadership development program (Day, 2001). The initial phase of the program involves reviewing a web-based DE component consisting of (n=38) programs developed using Camtasia Relay<sup>®</sup> software and administered through a partnership with North Carolina State University. Each DE module includes subject content, study guides, sample test questions, assignments, and recommended resources for learning. Students are required to complete each of the DE modules and assignments before their arrival at the training center. These learning modules provide necessary baseline content that will be built upon and reinforced through lectures, hands-on learning, and interactions with other park professionals throughout the 3-day on-site training.

Once on-site for the second phase, participants attend courses with curriculum specific to their year in the program. Course materials are delivered through a variety of active learning techniques (e.g. case studies, roundtable, small group exercises, and panel discussions). Oglebay Resort & Conference Center in Wheeling, WV hosts the on-site phase of the program, and provides participants' ground transportation.

At the conclusion of each year, students must pass a written exam. Those successfully completing the required two-year course work receive a certificate of completion from the National Association of State Park Directors. Once off-site, participants provide valuable feedback to the board of regents through the completion of an online post-training program evaluation based on many aspects of the participants' experience. Program evaluation is regularly defined as "a study designed and conducted to assist some audience to assess an object's merit and worth" (Stufflebeam, 2001, p. 11). Merit and worth is found through identifying the participants' perceived inherent value of the SPLS through the evaluation responses and further strengthening the foundational curriculum and course content.

A partnership with STIHL Corporation offers scholarships which allow some participants to have their travel fees subsidized. Other participants are funded through their state park system, pay for the tuition out of pocket, or host fund raisers to offset tuition and transportation costs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations are investing record amounts of time and financial resources to leadership training to ensure highly competent managers are prepared to fill the shoes of the retiring workforce. A recent report published by the Association for Talent Development (ASTD) noted that \$164.2 billion was spent by United States organizations on employee training in 2012 (Miller, 2013). This expenditure is dramatically higher (by over 23%) when compared to expenditures reported in 2007 when an estimated \$126 billion was spent on training (Paradise, 2007). This spending is supported by the record numbers of workers who will retire in the foreseeable future. A Pew Research Report highlighting emerging retirement trends over the next 19 years, suggested 10,000 people will reach age 65 each day (Cohn & Taylor, 2010), requiring organizations to identify and promote additional leaders to fill higher level management positions as they become vacant. These trends are important to understand because investment in leadership training and development has the potential to produce long-lasting direct and indirect personal and organizational benefits (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999); they demonstrate the ability to increase human capital, which is an organizational resource that can provide competitive advantages (Tharenou, Saks, & Moore, 2007), such as recruitment and retention of higher caliber employees resulting in reduced turnover. Additionally, financial benefits to organizations choosing to invest in training and development have been identified by a number of researchers (Huselid, 1995; Jacobs & Jones, 1995; Lam & White, 1998; Swanson, 1994; Ulrich, 1997). All of these factors assist with economic growth (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009) and impacts to local economies. Expenditures on the goods and services provided by these organizations also

have significant economic impacts in their respective communities through direct and indirect expenditures. For example, visitors to Texas State Parks spent an estimated \$1.9 billion on goods and services in fiscal year 2014 (Jeong & Crompton, 2014). Many organizational leaders have an understanding of how their organizations impact communities. However, without comprehensive leadership development training, the next generation of leaders may not fully understand their organizations' macro-level significance.

A second set of benefits derived from leadership training has shown to increase employee affective, behavioral, and cognitive (ABC's) abilities (Kraiger et al., 1993; Salas & Stagl, 2009). Some outcomes can transfer directly back into the workplace which allows the employee a platform to exhibit newly learned material, while other benefits transfer back indirectly, translating to enhanced overall employee satisfaction, team cohesion, social capital, and organizational reputation (2009).

So, who gets training? Many variables are considered when organizations and managers determine who receives basic or more advanced training. It is common practice for employers to provide basic orientation training for new employees to ensure they have an understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the organization. After the initial orientation training, more advanced training options can be offered by employers. The more advanced or specialized training often requires management approval due to the costs and potential benefits to the organization. Specialized training can also be sought out by individuals seeking additional knowledge or a competitive advantage. When organizations decide to provide additional leadership training, they often make their decisions based on current employees who show high levels of future potential, current job performance, or

ranking (Dugan & O'Shea, 2014). More specifically, trainee characteristics often include employees' cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation, and perceived utility of training (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Additionally, consideration for the transferability or application of learned materials needs to be factored in during this process. Organizations placing emphasis on the selection of those who receive leadership development treatments have also been linked to increased performance returns (Collins & Holton, 2004).

Additional factors such as training design and work environment need to be considered when a leadership development program is implemented (Grossman & Salas, 2011). Training design needs to consider the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning. For example, the SPLS curriculum can increase participants' knowledge about leadership practices, it can provide the participants with a stronger connection to state parks, and it can provide the participants transferable tools and practices with the intent of post-course implementation at their state park. Leadership training programs also need to incorporate different strategies in order to accommodate individuals' domains of learning to produce the greatest learning outcomes (Collins & Holton, 2004). One way to accomplish this is to incorporate a blended learning program consisting of both in-class and online environments. The blended learning environment has the potential to provide the greatest performance outcomes and levels of satisfaction when students believe that the content is worthwhile and delivery methods are perceived as valuable and simple (Wu, Tennyson, Hsia, 2010).

Another important consideration to understand is the transfer of learned materials in the post training environment. If the post training environment does not encourage the

transfer of information, the training will fail to provide long term personal and organizational benefits (Coulter, Grossman, & Salas, 2012). Some employees receive leadership development training but are not able to transfer their acquired knowledge back into the workplace due to their position as a mid-level manager if they're not supported by upper management. (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010). Additional barriers to implementation of newly learned materials into the workplace have been identified as a lack of agency goals and direction, lack of available funding, as well as little to no incentives to try recently acquired knowledge (Anderson, Fredrickson, & Dybiec, 1995).

The SPLS goals and mission are important to the future of state parks. State parks across the country have been providing visitors with wide varieties of recreational opportunities since 1885 when Niagra Reservation State Park was dedicated as the first originally recognized State Park (Landrum, 2004). Since then, the *State Park Movement in America* has led state parks to be one of the most highly utilized outdoor recreation settings in America. State parks are an essential component to parks and recreation in the United States as they provide recreation opportunities to more than 720 million visits per year (Leung, Smith, Miller & Serenari, 2014), outpacing visits to National Parks by more than 440 million visits per year (America's State Parks, 2014). State parks are found in both rural and urban environments and provide a vast array of facilities, trails and countless recreational opportunities for all types of visitors (Table 2).

Table 2. *State Park Facts from Fiscal Year 2013<sup>a</sup>*

Type	Total
Total State Park visits	727,445,992
Number of State Park units	8,209
Total acreage	15,311,489
Total trail miles	42,434
Total campsites	222,394

<sup>a</sup> Reported from the *Statistical Report of State Park Operations: 2012-2013* (Leung, Smith, Miller & Serenari, 2014)

Finally, the outdoor recreation industry in America supports 6.1 million American jobs and is responsible for \$646 billion in direct consumer spending each year, contributing nearly 80 billion annually to federal, state and local tax revenues (Southwick Associates, 2012).

### **Evaluation Tools**

Evaluation tools are ultimately utilized to ensure desired training outcomes are achieved. Training evaluations can be self-assessed or completed by trainee superiors. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2008) identified three specific reasons why training evaluation is needed:

1. To justify the existence and budget of the training department by showing how it contributes to the organization's objectives and goals;
2. To decide whether to continue or discontinue training programs; and
3. To gain information on how to improve future training programs

Despite all of the benefits gained from organizational investments in training, less than 5% of training programs are assessed to determine the economic value to their organization (Swanson, 2001), or return on development investment (Avolio et al., 2010).

This research utilizes post-training evaluation results from a subsection of SPLS graduates (n=79) and serves to provide the Board of Regents with a better understanding of whether or not the organization's goals, mission, and core-competencies are being met through participant self-reported outcomes. Additionally, this research will provide an assessment of post-training evaluation methods and provide recommendations for the methodology used in order to dynamically capture self-reported participant outcomes.

## METHOD

### **Data Collection**

SPLS Graduates (n=79) were emailed a link and asked to respond to an online (surveymonkey.com), thirteen question post-training survey. This survey was developed by SPLS administrators with the intent of obtaining data to better understand participants' demographic information and the participants' outcomes of graduating the SPLS. Included in this survey were both open-ended and list response questions (Table 3) Surveys were administered between October 2012 and January 2013. Three reminder follow-up emails were sent (one week, two weeks, and two and half weeks after the initial email). This approach resulted in a 100% response rate. The objectives of this online evaluation were threefold: (1) evaluate the overall effectiveness of the SPLS; (2) help determine the school's future direction; and (3) ensure that the mission and the goals of the school are achieved.

Table 3. *Survey Questions and Types*

Question	Response Type	Other Option Yes/No	Coding Method
1. How did you learn about the State Park Leadership School (SPLS)?	List	Yes	Coded by single researcher
2. What was your primary reason for attending the SPLS?	List	Yes	Coded by single researcher
3. In what way(s) was the SPLS useful to you?	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; inter-rater reliability
4. What information did you learn in the SPLS that you use in your current position?	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; inter-rater reliability
5. What new practice(s) did you implement as a result of participating in the SPLS?	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; inter-rater reliability
6. Has graduating from the SPLS made a difference in your job? For example, did you receive a promotion? More responsibilities?	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; inter-rater reliability
7. Please share any overall impressions you have of the SPLS with the purpose of improving the school.	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; inter-rater reliability
8. Gender	List	No	Coded by single researcher
9. Highest education level achieved	List	No	Coded by single researcher
10. Your current age in years	Open-ended	No	Coded by single researcher
11. Current job title	Open-ended	No	Multiple coders; coding across disciplines
12. Total number of years working in a state park	Open-ended	No	Coded by single researcher
13. State Park System in which you are currently employed	Open-ended	No	Coded by single researcher

## Data Analysis

Completed survey responses were exported from SurveyMonkey.com and saved in a Microsoft Excel® workbook. A coding manual was collaboratively developed by the principal investigator and by one university professor to accurately categorize the nine qualitative question responses and to code the remaining four (Appendix B). Next, all responses were coded using one of three methods:

1. Responses to seven questions were coded by a single researcher due to the specificity of each response;
2. Responses to five questions were coded by three researchers due to the breadth of content in each response. *Inter-rater reliability percent agreement* statistics were calculated to mitigate researcher bias;
3. One question pertaining to levels of management was coded using *collaborative coding across disciplines & investigator triangulation techniques* due to the wide variety of responses. This collaborative process included a state park industry professional, a university professor, and the principal investigator. Each individual coded the responses into three ascending levels of management, then each of the coded responses were collectively assessed. The matching responses were coded as agreed upon, and the responses that did not match required an additional meeting where the responses were discussed, ultimately agreed upon and recorded.

After all of the questions were coded using these techniques, frequencies and percentages were calculated for each question, means and inter-rater percent agreement were calculated where appropriate.

## RESULTS

Survey results suggested that graduates of the SPLS overwhelmingly benefitted both personally and professionally from their participation in the program. The graduates, represented two Canadian Provinces and 33 states (Figure 2) Almost three fourths of graduates were male (n=58, 73%) (Table 4). Ninety percent (n=71) reported receiving a college degree or higher (Table 5). Forty-two percent (n=33) were 34-40 years of age with an average age of 41 (Table 6). When asked to identify their management level, the majority (n=52, 65%) identified themselves as lower management, and only 5 (6%) upper management (Table 7). Collectively, these graduates have been working for America's state parks for more than 15 years on average (Table 8).

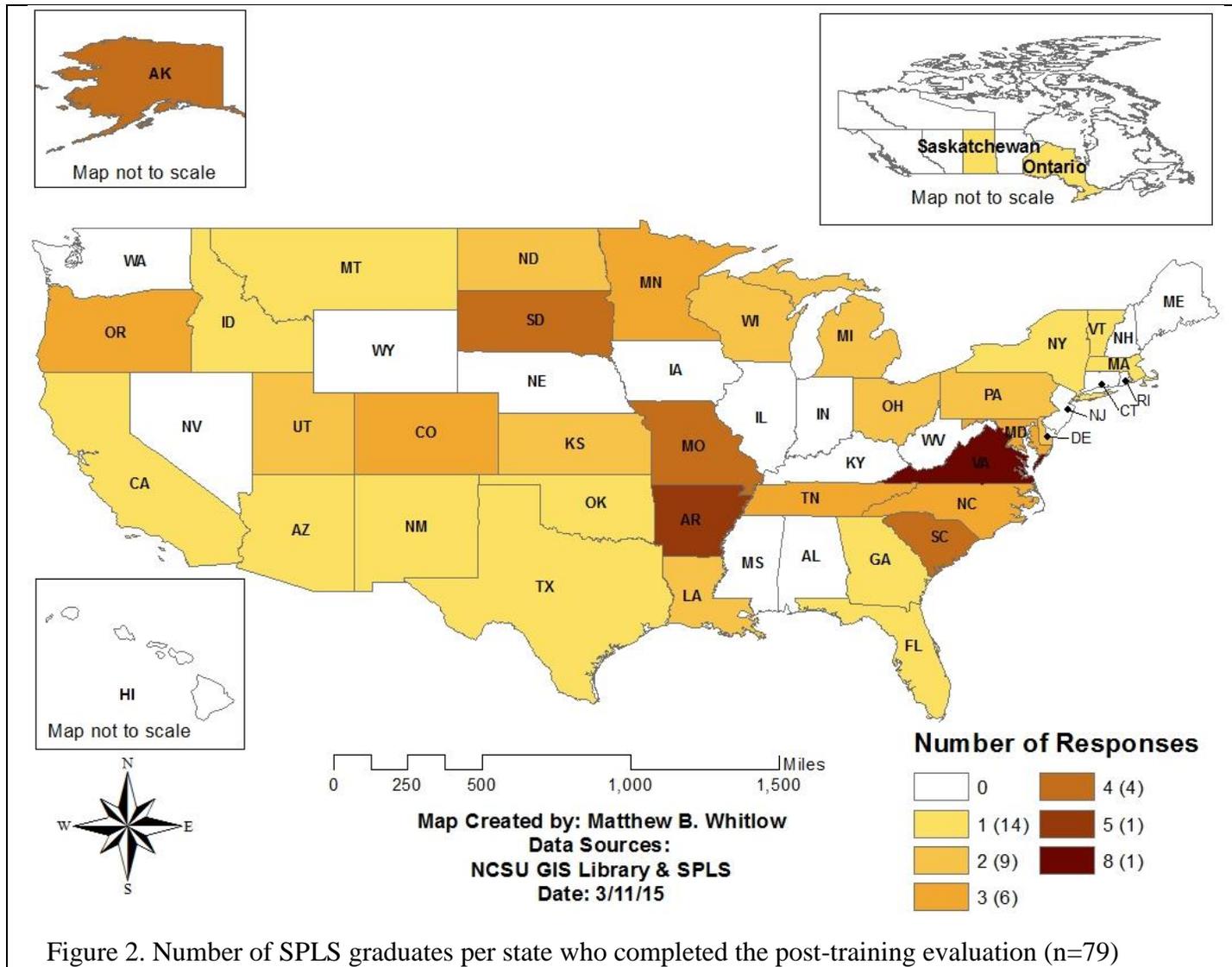


Table 4. *Gender*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Male	58	73
Female	21	27
Total	79	100

Table 5. *Highest Education Level Achieved*

Response	Frequency	Percent
College Degree	53	67
Graduate School Degree	11	14
Some Graduate School	7	9
Some College	7	9
High School Degree	1	1
Total	79	100

Table 6. *Current Age in Years*

Range	Frequency	Percent
27-33	11	14
34-40	33	42
41-47 <sup>a</sup>	20	25
48-54	14	18
55-59	1	1
Total	79	100

<sup>a</sup> Mean = 41

Table 7. *Current Employment Level*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Lower Management <sup>a</sup>	52	66
Middle Management	22	28
Upper Management	5	6
Total	79	100

<sup>a</sup> Coded into ascending levels of management

Table 8. *Number of Years Working in State Parks*

Range	Frequency	Percent
2-7	7	9
8-13	26	33
14-19 <sup>a</sup>	23	29
20-25	17	22
26-32	5	6
Total	78	99
Missing	1	1
Total	79	100

<sup>a</sup> Mean = 15.4

### Question 1. How did you learn about the State Park Leadership School?

The majority of responses (72.5%) indicated they learned about the SPLS through their *State Park Director* (Table 9). Additional responses included *Supervisor*, *Marketing Brochure*, and *Word of Mouth* which recorded the fewest responses. Due to this question having an ‘*Other*’ option with the opportunity to enter a personalized response, one respondent stated “Supervisor – My supervisor received a marketing brochure.” This response was recorded as both *Supervisor* and *Marketing Brochure*.

Table 9. *How Did You Learn About the State Park Leadership School?*

Source	Frequency	Percent
State Park Director	58	72.5
Supervisor	19	23.8
Marketing Brochure	2	2.5
Word of Mouth	1	1.3
Total <sup>a</sup>	80	100

<sup>a</sup> Total reflects multiple responses in different categories

**Question 2. What was your primary reason for attending the SPLS?**

The primary factor for attending the SPLS (Table 10) was identified as *Recommended by Supervisor*, (37.6%) followed closely by *Increase my Knowledge* (34.1%) and *Career Advancement* (27.1%). Multiple *Other* responses were recorded and coded into multiple categories, one specifically indicated their interest in evaluating the program to determine if the SPLS is ideal for their employees to attend.

Table 10. *What was Your Primary Reason for Attending the SPLS?*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Recommended by Supervisor	32	37.6
Increase my Knowledge	29	34.1
Career Advancement	23	27.1
Other <sup>a</sup>	1	1.2
Total <sup>b</sup>	85	100

<sup>a</sup> Responses that did not fit in categorical responses

<sup>b</sup> Total reflects multiple responses in different categories

### Question 3. In what way(s) was the SPLS useful to you?

*Professional Development* was identified with the greatest frequency (n=58) as the way the SPLS was most useful (Table 11). One respondent stated “It has provided an overview of the many different facets in being a park manager and how to try and address specific challenges that arise on the job.” *Networking* had the second highest frequency (n=48). One person wrote “Networking with other state park professionals was the most beneficial.” Finally, *Personal Development* (n=30) was identified as an outcome from the training. For example, one participant stated “Encouraged me to think outside of my normal ‘box’.” All responses were categorically coded, and many coded into more than one category. For example, one participant stated “The course offered relevant information related to the daily responsibilities of park managers. The networking opportunities with other park employees were beneficial and provided an opportunity to learn from their experiences.” This response fit each of the three identified categories.

Table 11. *In What Way(s) was the SPLS Useful to You?*

Response	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Professional Development	58	42.6
Networking	48	35.3
Personal Development	30	22.1
Total <sup>b</sup>	136	100

<sup>a</sup> Intercoder reliability percent agreement = 80.3%

<sup>b</sup> Total reflects multiple responses in different categories

**Question 4. What information did you learn in the SPLS that you use in your current position?**

*Park Operations* received the highest frequency of responses (n=41) with responses along the lines of “Trend analysis, cultural resource management awareness, time management, and probably many others in theory.” (Table 12). The *Other* category followed closely (n=23), with many responses echoing similar non-specific sentiments, including “Wow, too long to list. I can’t think of one topic that I haven’t used or referenced.” Next, *Visitor Relations* (n=20) responses included “How to deal with the public and elected politicians effectively.” Finally, *Personal Development* (n=17) was identified as one of the learning outcomes. One example stated “It connected me to the resource at a different level”.

Table 12. *What Information Did You Learn in the SPLS That You Use in Your Current Position?*

Response	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Park Operations	41	40.6
Other <sup>b</sup>	23	22.8
Visitor Relations	20	19.8
Personal Development	17	16.8
Total <sup>c</sup>	101	100

<sup>a</sup> Intercooder reliability percent agreement = 79.6%

<sup>b</sup> Responses that did not fit in categorical responses

<sup>c</sup> Total reflects multiple responses in different categories

**Question 5. What new practices did you implement as a result of participating in the SPLS?**

Responses from this question were categorically coded. Responses fitting into the category *Park Operations* were identified most frequently (n=40) pertaining to implemented practices as a result of attending the SPLS (Table 13). One response fitting into this category stated “Some techniques from Landscape Protection, Trail design, historical park preservation and human resources.” *Personal Development* (n=18) included responses such as “I became a better public speaker because I now feel I have a better understanding and knowledge of my role.” *None* (n=14) included responses such as “N/A”, or more specifically “I would have if I got the below promotion.” The category *None* will be further discussed in the conclusions section. *Visitor Relations* (n=13), including “Working to expand community focus group.” Finally, and *Other* (n=10) had the least responses. One response that fit into the *Other* category stated “I have implemented quite a few practices from the school” and was coded as other since it did not cite any specific examples.

Table 13. *What New Practices Did You Implement as a Result of Participating in the SPLS?*

Response	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Park Operations	40	42.1
Personal Development	18	19.0
None <sup>b</sup>	14	14.7
Visitor Relations	13	13.7
Other <sup>c</sup>	10	10.5
Total <sup>d</sup>	95	100

<sup>a</sup> Intercoder reliability percent agreement = 88.6%

<sup>b</sup> Some respondents have not implemented any new practices, others did not respond to the question

<sup>c</sup> Responses that did not fit in categorical responses

<sup>d</sup> Total reflects multiple responses in different categories

**Question 6. Has graduation from the SPLS made a difference in your job? For example, did you receive a promotion?**

Over three fourths (n=62) of responses responded *Yes* (Table 14) with responses along the lines of “Yes, received two promotions and have received more responsibilities.” The remaining reported *No* (n=17). One respondent who was coded as *No* stated “Not yet, but there has not been a chance to promote due to a lack of open positions.”

Table 14. *Has Graduation From the SPLS Made a Difference in Your Job? For Example, Did You Receive a Promotion?*

Response	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Yes	62	78.5
No	17	21.5
Total	79	100

<sup>a</sup> Intercoder reliability percent agreement = 98.7%

**Question 7. Please share any overall impressions you have of the SPLS with the purpose of improving the school.**

Responses from this question were categorically coded. Responses fitting into the *Positive* category, such as “One of the most valuable training programs I have participated in since beginning my career with state parks,” were identified as the most frequent response (n=54) (Table 15). *Neutral Impressions* were also identified (n=12) with responses similar to “I would recommend a different location of training, and maybe a less in classroom and more out in the parks”, as well as *Negative Impressions* (n=1). Twelve Additional respondents did not complete this question.

Table 15. *Please Share Any Overall Impressions You Have of the SPLS With the Purpose of Improving the School.*

Response	Frequency <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Positive	51	76.1
Neutral	15	22.4
Negative	1	1.5
Total <sup>b</sup>	67	100

<sup>a</sup> Intercoeder reliability percent agreement = 93.3%

<sup>b</sup> Twelve respondents did not answer this question

### **Inter-rater reliability percent agreement results.**

Inter-rater reliability percent agreement statistics were processed on five of the thirteen questions. Responses to these questions could have been interpreted by coders many different ways. Therefore, with the added rigor, these results indicated mid to high levels of agreement between coders (Table 16), and furthermore providing additional indicators of significance, strengthening the results for these five questions. The question with the highest level of percent agreement (98.7%) was question six; has graduation from the SPLS made a difference in your job? For example, did you receive a promotion? The responses to this question typically included a *Yes* or *No* response and had little variation in the responses. At the other end of the spectrum is question four (79.6%); What information did you learn at the SPLS that you use in your current position? The *Other* category was identified as the third highest category from all of the responses. Many of the respondents indicated they use a lot of the learned materials in many different areas of their job “we use most of what was covered” replied one graduate. Since it wasn’t specific, it could have been recorded as *Other* or categorized into each of the identified categories.

Table 16. *Inter-Rater Reliability Percent Agreement*

Question	Percent Agreement <sup>a</sup>
Q3. In What Way(s) was the SPLS Useful to You?	80.3
Q4. What Information Did You Learn in the SPLS That You Use in Your Current Position?	79.6
Q5. What New What New Practices Did You Implement as a Result of Participating in the SPLS?	88.6
Q6. Has Graduation From the SPLS Made a Difference in Your Job? For Example, Did You Receive a Promotion?	98.7
Q7. Please Share Any Overall Impressions You Have of the SPLS With the Purpose of Improving the School.	93.3

<sup>a</sup>Mean=88.1%

## DISCUSSION

This research set out to accomplish two main objectives; first, to determine if the SPLS mission and goals were being met, and second, to provide an assessment and recommendations of post training evaluation methodology to strengthen the outcomes of the school. The results from the post program evaluation yielded evidence supporting the idea that the mission and goals of the SPLS are being attained.

As previous research indicated, employees can be selected for additional training based on one of many personal characteristics (Dugan & O'Shea, 2014; Grossman & Salas, 2011). These analyses indicated graduates of the SPLS were generally pleased with the outcomes from participating in the leadership training program. These outcomes are achieved through the deliberate inclusion of specific learning materials, thoroughly targeted to topics identified within each of the nine core-competencies. The results from this study are not measuring each core-competency directly, rather, they are measuring categorical responses to specific questions related to learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are directly related to the course materials that were developed based on the nine identified core-competencies. These results are further substantiated by 100% of respondents reporting the use of newly learned materials in their current position; 100% of respondents indicated that the SPLS has been useful to them in one or more areas, including *Personal Development*, *Professional Development*, and *Networking*; and more than 85% of graduates have taken the concepts learned from the SPLS and implemented new processes or procedures at their respective park. These findings suggest that the right employees were informed and selected to

participate in the training greater than 75% of the time, and the SPLS is upholding their mission to enhance the development of professional leaders for America's state parks.

The majority of SPLS graduates indicated that the SPLS made a difference in their job (n=61, 77.2%). Since this is a dual-pronged question, asking if it made a difference in their career, then uses an example asking about receiving a promotion, results could be swayed as responses to this question could favor whether or not a promotion was received as opposed to the intended question; determining if graduating the SPLS made a difference in their job in general. Furthermore, results indicated that the *State Park Director* or *Supervisor* were identified by the graduates most often as the primary SPLS information source (n=77, 96.3%). Although 77.2% indicated that graduating the SPLS made a difference in their career, what is not clear is understanding if the SPLS is the reason for the positive difference in their position, or if the influence of their superior is one of the factors.

While a majority of graduates were able to implement newly learned materials in their current position as a result of participating in the SPLS (n=68, 88.9%), some were not. Multiple factors need consideration when assessing the inability to implement newly learned materials. Evaluation questions did not ask why materials were not implemented. Potential factors worth exploring in the post training environment include; the encouragement of transferring information (Coulter, Grossman, & Salas, 2012); lack of support from higher level managers (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010); and unclear organizational goals, reduced funding, and few personal incentives (Anderson, Fredrickson, & Dybiec, 1995). Individuals and their cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation and perceived utility of training (Grossman & Salas, 2011) should also receive some consideration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This research identified some of the individual and organizational benefits associated with the successful completion of the SPLS by analyzing post-training evaluation results. The current evaluation method included an online evaluation tool used to gather post-training evaluation data. Opportunities abound to modify the content and structure of the questions in the current evaluation tool. Additional opportunities to capture participant survey responses can assist with the strengthening the SPLS. Through strategic implementation of modified evaluation methodology and content structure, the SPLS should focus on gathering more targeted data from participants for further in-depth analysis. This data can be leveraged with the current available resources to strengthen aspects of the SPLS.

A number of post-program evaluation models exist and each possess unique benefits. Depending on the types and breadth of data sought, a pre-test evaluation can be administered and used to capture baseline data, such as demographics, job-related characteristics, and current levels of knowledge on various topics. Results from the pre-test can be used to inform the Board of Regents with the participants' level of knowledge of the proposed curriculum. The Board of Regents can use these data to modify or append the current curriculum. This also gives presenters the ability to more effectively focus their materials to meet the demands and needs of attendees. Pre-test results can also be used in conjunction with post-test results to assess how one's level of knowledge on any of the listed competencies has changed as a result of attending the SPLS. This has the potential to increase the internal validity of the participants' reported outcomes and attribute their personal, professional or organizational

growth back to the SPLS. Therefore, it is recommended that a pre-test/post-test evaluation be implemented to potentially strengthen both program content and participant outcomes.

Research looking at training outcomes (The United Way, 1996) recommends a follow-up evaluation be administered six to twelve months following program completion due to the varying rates of transferability of learned materials into the workplace. As research previously indicated, varying rates of transferability can be attributed to either personal or work-related circumstances (Coulter, Grossman, & Salas, 2012). Sometimes the transferability of materials into the workplace is immediate, and sometimes the process is drawn out. Graduates are typically leaving training programs feeling encouraged and eager to transfer some of their new knowledge and abilities, however, research indicates that the least amount of support is offered by management immediately upon return from a training program (Avolio, 2004, p.88). By adding a follow up evaluation six to twelve months after program completion, additional data can be collected on outcomes that are typically associated with short to mid-term timeframes.

One such question that can be addressed in a follow up evaluation is participants' level of information retention. Information retention is discussed in the first goal of the SPLS and it needs to be measured. The structure of the SPLS provides time to take what has been learned and implement these practices into their respective work environments at the conclusion of the first year. Having the opportunity to attend a second year can assist with information retention as materials may have some overlap. If a question, or set of questions can be added to a follow up evaluation, specifically targeting information retention, the SPLS regents can have a better understanding of how the course materials are being utilized. If this

type of analysis is completed, it can be paired with other questions that address barriers to implementation.

In the current study, approximately 15% of respondents reported that no new practices have been implemented. If 15% of all graduates have not implemented any new learning into their positions, the Board of Regents needs to know why. Correlation models can compare barriers to implementation and other factors such as time since graduation, graduates' position within their organization, or other factors. We all have heard the phrase 'use it or lose it'; perhaps barriers to implementation need to be addressed in the pre-survey to assess whether or not participants have ground to stand on in the post-training environment. Before determining how to answer this question and others like it, consideration should be taken to identify the content of the evaluation(s). One of the most widely used models for evaluation is Kirkpatrick's four-level model, (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009) (Table 17). This model can be used to identify the types of questions to ask and serve as a guide to explore additional outcome-based measurement models. These questions can also be incorporated into any pre, post, or follow-up evaluation and follow similar structure to the currently used competency-based leadership model.

Table 17. *Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation for Training Programs*

Levels	Considerations
Level 1: Reaction	To what degree participants react favorably to the learning event.
Level 2: Learning	To what degree participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills and attitudes based on their participation in the learning event.
Level 3: Behavior	To what degree participants apply what they learned during training when they are back on the job.
Level 4: Results	To what degree targeted outcomes occur as a result of learning event(s) and subsequent reinforcement.

The Kirkpatrick Four-Level Model should be used as a template to address questions that may not have been originally considered. Evaluation questions need to be specific and capture the correct data for analysis. For example; one of the goals of the SPLS discusses how graduates need to retain the core-competencies required to operate parks. This follow-up evaluation should take into consideration addressing graduates' level of knowledge of the learned core-competencies to ensure this goal is being met.

The retention of learned material can be enhanced through communication and collaboration with the peer networks that were developed at the SPLS. Another goal of the SPLS is to facilitate the transfer of knowledge through the development of a nationwide peer network. To better understand the value of the peer networks developed at the SPLS, adding questions specific to social networks in the post course evaluation and the follow up evaluation should be considered. By adding these questions, the SPLS can conclude these relationships are being formed, maintained, and utilized to strengthen America's state parks.

Some of the questions can be modified to be clearer and to reduce skewed responses. In regards to the question asking about whether or not graduating from SPLS has made a difference in their job; it is recommended to remove the second question asking about receiving a promotion and consider making it its own question. The questions should instead be reworded:

1. Has graduation from the SPLS made a difference in your job? Y/N.
  - a. Please describe;
2. Have you received a promotion since graduating from the SPLS? Y/N.
  - a. If yes, do you partially attribute your promotion to graduating from the SPLS?

Restructuring this question may provide more useful results that can be used to strengthen the SPLS because the responses may suggest a higher level of relevant information that can be used to steer curriculum and indicate the importance of the SPLS to career advancement of state park personnel.

The SPLS should consider identifying participants' learning preferences through questions designed to assess different learning environments such as classroom, distance-education, blended classrooms, or through more hands-on approaches. Through a better understanding of individuals' learning styles, the SPLS can more effectively design the course layout for subsequent years. For example, some participants may learn better in collaborative environments, and perhaps some of the curriculum should be disseminated in the on-site portion of the program as opposed to the distance modules. Some of the responses

indicated that participants wanted to spend more time outdoors and working with more hands-on learning. There are opportunities to further engage SPLS participants and address some of their learning style needs and recommendations.

Finally, the majority of participants attended the State Park Leadership School because they were recommended by their State Park Director or Supervisor. In order to ensure they will continue to send participants to the SPLS, a separate evaluation tool should be considered to better understand their motivations and potential return on investment through a methodically structured evaluation tool that may include quantifiable questions. The SPLS needs to ensure the expectations of the directors and supervisors who are sending participants to the SPLS are being met. If their expectations are being met and the transfer of material to the workplace is taking place, great. If not, the SPLS needs to address the expectations of the recommending superiors to ensure they will continue to see the SPLS as a viable leadership training program and will continue to send participants from their parks.

## CONCLUSIONS

The mission and the goals of The National Association of State Park Directors – State Park Leadership School are being met. The SPLS has a mission to provide the leadership development training required to successfully manage America’s state parks. The results from this study suggest the SPLS facilitates positive learning outcomes through teaching their core-competency based curriculum and through the creation of peer networks across the country. The learning outcomes have also been identified through this study as having personal, professional, and organizational benefits. These factors are developing the next generation of state park leaders that will guide America’s parks and natural areas into the future.

The Board of Regents should consider regular reviews of post-training evaluation methods in order for the SPLS to remain a relevant leadership training program. Modifying the types of data collected, the approach to delivering multiple types of evaluations, and the addition of recommending supervisors’ surveys could provide additional results that will allow the SPLS to continue to flourish for years to come.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### SPLS Competencies 2014

#### **Competencies**

Philosophy and Planning  
Resource Management (natural & cultural)  
Administration  
Personnel Development & Management  
Leadership  
Community Relations  
Visitor Services  
Interpretative and Education Program Management  
Maintenance

#### **Course Topics** (by Competency)

##### **Philosophy and Planning**

- Establishing identity/traditions
- Planning (overview - needs advanced reading)
  - Strategic
  - Master
  - Landscape architectural design
- Conservation/preservation (overview)
- Customer service
- Parks law enforcement philosophy (pros and cons of different models)
- Trends and future challenges

##### **Resource Management** (natural and cultural)

- Resource planning models
- Stewardship
  - Forest
  - Wildlife
  - Range (not applicable in some states)
  - Water
  - Plant
  - Archeology
- Ecosystem management (overview – to include topics such as endangered species and invasive species)

- Land protection strategies (easements, etc.)
- Trails (design and build)
- Inventory process systems
- Environmental impact statements (processes & understanding)
- GIS as a management tool

### **Administration**

- Budget/fiscal (performance based management, etc.)
- Contract management practices
  - Concession
  - Services
  - RFP's
- Procurement procedures
- Marketing (principles: include different audiences & positioning the agency.)
- Time management
- Project management practices
- Networking (external and internal)
- Entrepreneurial trends

### **Personnel Development and Management**

- Employee relations
- Recruitment/retention
- Supervisory skills
- Human resource management (laws and regulations)
- Evaluation systems
- Manpower planning
- Multi-cultural management

### **Situational Leadership**

- Team building/creativity
- Motivational techniques
- Ethics
- Conflict resolution
- Coaching/mentoring
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Delegation/empowerment
- Decision making
- Change management

## **Community Relations**

- Friends groups
- Media
- Volunteers
- Government relations (federal, state, city, county)
- Partnerships/networking
- User groups
- User conflicts

## **Visitor Services**

- Interpretive and education
- Law enforcement
- Facility operations
- Programming
- Surveys/trends
- Crisis/emergency management
- Visitor service practices
- Special user practices

## **Interpretive and Education Program Management**

- Values of I & E Programs

## **Maintenance**

- Buildings
  - Historical
  - Non-historical
  - Infrastructure
- Grounds
- Equipment/vehicles
- Preventative/cyclical
- Maintenance planning/budget
- Project construction management
- Laws and regulations
  - ADA
  - Archaeology
  - Other
- Site safety and risk management
  - Facility

- Environmental
- OSHA

Employee safety

## Appendix B

### SPLS Coding Manual

Missing Data = 999

Error Data = 777

Normal Skip = 222

**Question 1:** How did you learn about the SPLS? (**HWLEARN**)

Word of mouth

State Park Director

Supervisor

Marketing brochure

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 2:** What was your primary reason for attending the SPLS? (**PRREASON**)

Recommended by supervisor

Career advancement

Increase my knowledge

Other

Other (TEXT)

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 3:** In what way(s) was the SPLS useful to you? (**HWUSEFUL**)

Networking

Personal Development

Professional Development

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 4:** What information did you learn in the SPLS that you use in your current position? (**INFOLRN**)

Visitor relations

Operations

Personal development

Other

Other (TEXT)

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 5:** What new practices did you implement as a result of participating in the SPLS?  
(NEWPRAC)

Visitor relations

Operations

Personal development

None

Other

Other (TEXT)

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 6:** Has graduation from the SPLS made a difference in your job? For example, did you receive a promotion? (MADEDIFF)

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 7:** Please share any overall impressions you have of the SPLS with the purpose of improving the school (IMPRESS)

1 = Negative Impression

2 = Neutral Impression

3 = Positive Impression

Suggestions (TEXT)

1 = YES

0 = NO

**Question 8:** Sex (GENDER)

1 = Male

2 = Female

**Question 9:** Highest education level achieved (SCHOOL)

1 = High school degree

2 = Some college

3 = College degree

4 = Some graduate school

5 = Graduate school degree

**Question 10:** Your current age in years (AGE)

**Question 11:** Current job title (JOBLEVEL)

1 = Lower management

2 = Middle management

3 = Upper management

**Question 12:** Total number of years in a state park (**YRSINPRK**)

**Question 13:** State park system in which you are currently employed (**REGION**)

1 = Northeast

2 = Midwest

3 = South

4 = West

5 = Canada