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Society of Parks and Recreation Educators Chairs Conference

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Opening

• Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to be part of your gathering this weekend. And let me offer a special note of thanks to Lee deLisle--one of my former students.

• You know, last fall at a gathering of incoming Western Michigan University freshmen, Lee told the story about his first meeting with me when I was a young professor at the University of Connecticut and he was a student in a class I taught. Those young freshmen were amazed--first, that Lee had indeed been a student just like them, and second that I was as old as I am and still working.

• I am enormously proud of Lee and grateful that he is a faculty member at Western Michigan University and, like all of you, preparing a new generation of students who will run our parks and recreation programs in these tough times.

• These are tough times, but they are times when recreation, leisure and access to parks are more important than ever. You are leaders in your profession now and your students will be beginning their leadership roles in a few years.

• My message to you about how you and your students can lead in these tough times has three basic ingredients:

  -Listen to your public. Engage them and let them guide you.
  -Keep an eye on the demographics and the diversity of the public you serve.
-Celebrate your role and the facilities you manage as places that are models of civility and respect.

**Building healthy communities**

- At my university, we're working to build a healthy university we focus on health in the very broadest sense of the word. It's an approach I encourage at every level of leadership.

- We define a healthy community as a place where we focus on:
  - Sustainability,
  - Diversity, and
  - Enhancing our Strength and Health.

- All three are critically related and allow us to preserve and empower the most precious resource we have--human capital. I'll talk a bit more about that in a few moments.

- When it comes to bringing a community on board and getting people involved in building a healthy community, I've found that it's far easier than we often think.

  *(Utah story about working with Utah community to build an AHEC great here)*

- That community knew, perhaps better than we did, what it would take to make its families healthy. They were, in fact, ahead of us. We just needed to pay attention and listen to them.

- Going forward, I think you'll find that more and more often, such basic facilities as playgrounds will be paramount as ways communities can help build health and
encourage recreation. And we will need to listen to them and become their allies and advocates.

• Too often now, the kind of simple physical activity that playgrounds encourage in our children has been scheduled out of the school day. Parents and grandparents know what's missing from their children's lives--and their lives. We need to listen and respond to the simplest solutions proposed. Our responses may help build community acceptance for more complex solutions if we need to propose them in the future.

• Your organization's support of the "No Child Left Inside" initiative reflects a firm understanding of just how important issues like these are. I think you'll find something of a sea change under way as the general public--the people we serve--become more attuned to the deficits being created by funding shortages in their schools and in their communities. Let those citizens lead with you in fighting for programs and facilities.

**The demographics--watch and respond**

• Building public support also means building a strong parks-and-recreation work force to serve that public. Here's where today's tough times make things more challenging than ever. We have to reach out and build that work force in a time when the resources to do so are dramatically reduced.

• As educators, you know the current economic crisis is real and the implications on all of society, including its social institutions such as schools and universities, are substantive.
• The world of higher education, for example, continues to feel the pinch with daily news reports of universities that freeze hiring, eliminate sabbaticals, employ furloughs, roll back salaries, lay off faculty and staff, and a host of other measures, including program eliminations. How will those of us in health, wellness and recreation fare when the “rubber meets the road.” Will we be viewed as essential, value-added, or will we be cast in the mode of nice, but not essential. How do we influence public sentiment in our favor? Part of the answer lies in how well we do in educating a diverse student population that can comfortably take its place in the communities we serve.

• When I speak of diversity I focus on the big “D”—diversity in its many forms, to include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability and others who may feel omitted or excluded from university campuses. Truly great universities must be diverse. They must be inclusive and there must be programs committed to recruiting and supporting others who may feel excluded.

• The demographics of our country are changing dramatically with a significant shift in the racial and ethnic mix. This creates enormous opportunities for all of society, including the field of recreation, to be far more inclusive in its curricular and research approaches. Because of the public-oriented nature of this profession, this is a field that needs to be responsive and be a leader when it comes to the preparation of teachers, faculty, and scholars who represent and are cognizant of the needs of our minority community.

Groups we label today as "minorities" will soon take on a majority role. So-called minorities, the U.S. Census Bureau projects, will constitute a majority of the nation’s children under 18 by 2023. By 2039 these same present-day minorities are slated to make up the majority of all working-age Americans. If we ignore these important
changes to our population, our profession and the important services we provide are in serious trouble.

According to the new Census Bureau forecast, in 2050 (only 5 decades):

- The number of Hispanic people will nearly triple, to 133 million from 47 million, to account for 30 percent of Americans, compared with 15 percent today.

- People who report they are Asian, with their ranks soaring to 41 million from 16 million, will make up more than 9 percent of the population, up from 5 percent.

- More than three times as many people are expected to identify themselves as multi-racial — 16 million, accounting for nearly 4 percent of the population.

- The population of people who define themselves as black is projected to rise to 66 million from 41 million, but increase its overall representation by barely two percentage points, to 15 percent.

According to demographers, no other country has ever experienced such rapid racial and ethnic change. We cannot ignore these important shifts in our population.

- We ignore those changes at our own peril. We must address them and find the resources to diversify our professions even in this time of budget duress. That is part of leading in tough times. We have to take every opportunity to reach out to diverse students we meet in our communities and engage such students who come to our campuses without a clear idea of the careers that exist in our disciplines.

- I mentioned the "Big D" definition of diversity. Diversity also means an appreciation for ideas and different ways of thinking. In this respect, one of the great values of an international university is the opportunity to benefit from the many
talents and customs that students from around the globe bring to the university campus. The presence of students from around the world allows our domestic students to increase their cultural awareness, broaden their worldview and prepare themselves for the quickly changing make-up of their own communities and nation.

This occurs in various settings across the university—via the classroom, study groups, dining hall and social gatherings—all leading to a better understanding of the cultural norms and ways of expression and thinking of others from distant lands.

• Likewise, we need to increase dramatically the number of our students who travel and study beyond our own borders, those who are benefiting from the opportunity to live and learn in another part of world through study abroad and similar programs. That then brings us to the next logical agenda item. We also must enhance, through our curriculum, greater emphasis on language instruction so that our students—today, and definitely in the future—are equipped to be global citizens.

**Civility and Respect**

One of the major challenges facing all of society is the issue of civility and respect, or as some might say, “What happened to basic courtesy?” There is little wonder that our students, whether in high school or the university, are confused about respect. For example, on television, our commentators and political pundits refer to our national leaders not as President Bush or President Obama, but rather as Bush and Obama. In a similar way, in most physician offices it is not uncommon to hear a patient summoned from the waiting room by a nurse or aide by their first name.

Old or young, it does not matter that appropriate forms of courtesy such as last name and titles, even "Mister" or "Miss," seem to be lost. Now please do not misunderstand me, I am not that stuffy or formal, but it does seem to me that we
have lost much as a people by not reminding our students and others to be respectful of their elders and their leaders.

I once had the experience of having a very fine young faculty member who sought me out to complain that the students did not seem to respect him. He shared this while wearing his usual classroom attire, jeans, T-shirt and sneakers! It is no wonder.

However, on a more serious level, our students are watching and we have a great opportunity and responsibility to demonstrate – model, if you will – ways to engage others, eg., how we address a student or how we choose to acknowledge their question or input.

As your students enter the work force and engage with communities across the nation, I believe they'll find parks and recreation programs prime locations to help those communities re-establish islands of respect and civility that can make a difference in the lives of young people and families. The lessons and behaviors our students learn on our campuses, can have a transformative effect on the communities they serve.

**Closing**

Civility and respect, listening to the community and paying attention to demographics will allow us and our students to do the single thing most important to the future of our disciplines, our communities and our nation. It will allow us to sustain and preserve the well being of our most precious of all resources--human capital. When we fully realize the potential of all of our people, we will be far closer to having the healthy communities we all seek.
Our goal should be to create communities of people of all backgrounds who have mastered what novelist James Michener called "the art of living."

“The master in the art of living," he said, "makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence at whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him he's always doing both.”

Thank you for what you do to help us all master the "art of living" and thank you for making my views part of your considerations. Please enjoy the rest of your conference.