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AIS 4099-002

April 25, 2023

15 Hour Service Project Summary – Senior Capstone, Great Parks of Hamilton County

Over the course of the last couple months, I have learned that people are... gross. Let me explain. This semester I am wrapping up my time as a student at the University of Cincinnati (UC) in the Bachelor of Technical and Applied Studies program (BTAS). Being in my last semester as a senior, we were tasked with picking an organization of our choosing and completing 15 hours of service work with that particular organization. For this project, I choose to do something different and change it up from the normal service work I've done in the past. I choose to work with the Great Parks of Hamilton County (Great Parks). They are the non-profit organization in charge of looking after and taking care of most parks across Hamilton County. In all, Great Parks operates 22 parks and over 17,600 acres of park land. I thoroughly enjoyed my work at the parks and everyone that I met throughout the process.

My Role and Responsibility:

I've spent the last several months lending a hand at Great Parks and have done a handful of different jobs for them. This brings me back to my main point in the last paragraph... people are gross. Many of my volunteering events at the parks were litter pick up. This involved going to park owned property and scanning the property for litter and disposing of it properly. My very first volunteer event was at Campbell Lakes in Harrison, Ohio. Here we were assigned with the task of picking up litter on the corner edge of the park closest to the street. The amount of trash

that was on this corner was sickening and this is where I developed the infamous line of “people are gross”. However, litter pickup is very rewarding work. As you walk through the park and pick up trash, you can turn around and see the fruits of your labor and it's amazing. Other roles I had included: invasive plant removal, and a reforestation event. For the reforestation event, I packaged up baby trees and shipped them to local Cincinnati schools. The schools would then give these baby trees to students and allow them to plant the trees wherever they wanted. As far as responsibilities go, I was in charge of making sure that parks were left clean and free of litter. I was also in charge of making sure we tried to control an invasive plant species at a park. We were also responsible for our own safety, as well as the safety of others around us, while we worked. There is a wide variety of events offered at the parks. I was limited to invasive plant removal, reforestation, and litter pick up due to the time of year and only being a short-term volunteer. Great Parks also allows volunteers to help with trail maintenance, shelter construction, planting trees, collecting native seeds, and much more!

Identify What You Have Learned:

While working for the Great Parks I learned a lot about the organization and parks in general. I learned that Great Parks owns a lot of the parks in Hamilton Co., but they don't own all of them. Other parks in the city are operated by the City of Cincinnati themselves. I also learned that the organization was founded in 1930 as the Hamilton Co. Park District, and they are a separate subdivision of the State of Ohio. Furthermore, I learned that The Great Parks is operated by a board of commissioners. The board is made up of five individuals. In addition to the board of commissioners, the park also has an operating team that consists of a CEO, CFO, and others. Each park is open and operates 365 days a year from dusk till dawn. Great Parks has

a wide variety of parks they oversee, I attached an image below so you can see all of their many locations.

PARKS	CONSERVATION AREAS	MORE ADVENTURES
Campbell Lakes Preserve	Otto Armleder Memorial Park & Recreation Complex	Kroger Hills
Embshoff Woods	Sharon Woods	Newberry Wildlife Sanctuary
Farbach-Werner Nature Preserve	Shawnee Lookout	Oak Glen Nature Preserve
Fernbank Park	Triple Creek	Richardson Forest Preserve
Francis RecreAcres	Werk Road Property	
Glenwood Gardens	Winton Woods	Adventure Outpost
Lake Isabella	Withrow Nature Preserve	Highfeld Discovery Garden
Little Miami Golf Center	Woodland Mound	Nature Center at The Summit
Miami Whitewater Forest	View All Map	Park's Farm
Mitchell Memorial Forest		Winton Woods Riding Center

My organization's “clients” are people that visit and use local parks in Hamilton County! The organization also serves various sports teams and recreation events that use park property to host their events. Great Parks' responsibility to them is to maintain and create a safe environment for all its “clients”.

The Most Significant Thing I Learned:

After spending time working with Great Parks of Hamilton County, I would say the most significant thing I learned was how vital volunteers are to the success of parks. Parks are one of the most underfunded areas within the US and tend to get overlooked when it comes to funding increases. The more time that I spent with Great Parks, the more I realized how vital our work is. Every event that I went to was filled with volunteers and hardly any employees from the great parks. Lin and Ormsby (2021) state, “A pattern of budgetary deficits within the public sector has increased reliance on volunteers to advocate for and protect publicly managed natural and cultural resources,” (p. 25). This quote directly ties into what I witnessed at the parks. This experience will forever make me grateful for park employees and all that they do for us.

Clearly Identify the Effectiveness of your Role:

After my experience at the parks, I would say my role was very effective. The nice part about the work that I completed is that I could see the progress being made as I worked through projects. When I worked on litter pickup, I could turn around and see how the park grounds were cleaner. Then, when we were done with litter pickup, the truck would be filled with garbage bags. The same thing applied to invasive plant removal, you could see progress as we chopped down the invasive plants. The park employees were also very friendly and always made it known to us how important our work is for the success of the parks.

SWOT Analysis:

After taking some time to reflect on my experience with Great Parks of Hamilton County, I now want to take a turn and talk more about the organization as a whole. Great Parks of Hamilton Co. is a fantastic organization! All employees were super nice and extremely helpful when it came to working with volunteers on different tasks. Below I have completed a SWOT analysis on the organization using what I now know from research and from experience.

Strengths: Great Parks of Hamilton Co. does a lot of things right when it comes to their day-to-day operations. Some of the strongest things I noticed were, they had a strong mission statement. The statement reads, “To preserve and protect natural resources and to provide outdoor recreation and education in order to enhance the quality of life for present and future generations,” (Great Parks of Ham. Co. Website, n.d.). Other strengths include strong core values (integrity, sustainability, inclusivity, fun), lots of locations around Hamilton County, a friendly and helpful staff, AND excellent parks and trails at all park locations. These core strengths are what I think make Great Parks stand out as an organization in the area.

Weaknesses: Despite being strong in a lot of areas, there were a few minor weaknesses I noticed when I spent my time with the parks. The first biggest weakness I identified was lack of community awareness of the need for volunteers at the parks. Just like I explained earlier in this summary, volunteers are VITAL for the success of the parks. Miller (2019) states that “Volunteers are an important resource for green infrastructure, both providing important maintenance, as well as providing education and connection that promotes conservation and ecological work.” Even with the heavy importance on volunteers, I feel that the parks don’t advertise the need for volunteer help enough. Another weakness I found was lack of signage at certain parks. Some of the parks I went to were confusing on where to go. After talking to lots of the park employees, another weakness I identified was lack of staff. Most parks are currently understaffed. Then lastly, another weakness of the parks is lack of overall budget.

Opportunities: I identified several opportunities the park could use in order to grow. First, the park could build more trails. The more trails, the better. This will allow for greater recreation within the parks. Secondly, Great Parks of Ham. Co. could increase the number of fundraising events they host in order to increase the budget for other necessary functions at the parks. Third, Great Parks could add more events, such as new sporting events, for diverse audiences to attract new people to the park grounds. Fourth, the park could establish a blueway park system (trails that run around or through water). Lastly, Great Parks could establish more community partners to again increase funds that could be used on various projects at the parks.

Threats: Finishing up my SWOT analysis, I want to discuss some of the threats that effect Great Parks of Hamilton Co. There aren't many but a few notable threats are invasive species killing off native plants in the parks, litter and garbage damaging the parks, not enough staff to carry out necessary functions, and not enough volunteers to aid the staff. While there aren’t

many threats, the threats listed above could seriously impact Great Parks and their ability to keep our parks running efficiently.

Recommendations:

Wrapping everything up, I don't have many recommendations to make on behalf of my organization because I feel that they function pretty well as they are now. However, there are a few small suggestions I would make that I think would help out the parks based on my experience. Mainly, due to the vital importance of volunteers at our parks, I would recommend that Great Parks of Hamilton Co. advertise the need for these volunteers more. Maybe get in touch with some local schools and try to rally students to help out at the parks, or post small ads on social media platforms. Anything would help! Also, in order to help with the staffing issue, I would recommend that Great Parks raise their pay in order to attract more talent to the parks. I know this may be hard with lack of funding, but the extra money spent would be way worth it! There could be more leaders to help assist with necessary functions at the parks. One final recommendation I would make is to increase fundraising events! I know the parks have very limited budgets so creating and spending more time on fundraisers should help create a larger budget that can be spent on other essential needs at the parks. I feel that with these recommendations, operations at the parks would be perfect!

Conclusion:

Overall, I really enjoyed my time as a helping hand at Great Parks of Hamilton County. The work I did with them was difficult yet very rewarding. All other volunteers and staff members were so nice and always extremely helpful! As far as this project goes, I'm glad it was included in the curriculum for BTAS. I loved the experience and enjoyed stepping out of my

comfort zone and trying something new. I have greatly appreciated my time in this program, and I am sincerely sad to see it go! Thank you for everything!

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