

AAPRA 40th Anniversary: Reflections on Forty Years

Part 2 – The History of the Externship Program

Over the next twelve months, as we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration (AAPRA), we will reflect on our history as an organization; remembering leaders and events that were key to our founding, development and growth. We'll celebrate AAPRA's forty years of success; as noted in the initial ten-year history prepared by Bob Toalson, charter member and Executive Secretary/Treasurer at the time (1990), "from its inception the Academy has been very successful because of the hard work and efforts of some very dedicated people." –*Michal Anne Lord*

The **American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration Young Professional Externship Program** has a rich history of providing young professionals the opportunity to attend, network and become engaged with AAPRA and NRPA. Many new friendships, mentors and advisors have been created over the years of the program. *As a former Extern, I can tell you first hand that the program is an extraordinary experience like no other.* The following captures the Externship story, as well as the value of the Academy's investment in the program through a depiction of its history and firsthand accounts of former Externs and current Academy members.

Academy President-elect John Crompton suggested the idea of a "Future Administrators Management Program" for young practitioners at the Academy's General Membership Meeting in October of 1993. The idea of a future leaders program was discussed by the Board of Directors in January 1994, and although there was great support for this program, development was deferred due to concern about the ability to generate funds for the program as AAPRA was in the final stage of the formation of the AIPE/Academy Foundation and NRPA was conducting a fundraising campaign for the Ahrens-NRPA Institute.

In October of 1994, a task force chaired by Peter Witt was appointed and in January 1995, the Board approved a proposal outlining a Young Professional Externship Program which was to provide an opportunity for two externs to shadow a designated Academy member for two days during the NRPA Congress, enabling young professionals in the field to create additional contacts with members in the Academy, thus marking the beginning of the **AAPRA Young Professional Externship Program**, one of the Academy's key annual endeavors.

As it stands today, the Externship experience has evolved from the initial concept detailed above. Up to four externs, including two Ernest T. Atwell diversity externs, are selected for the honor from a fiercely competitive pool. The extern receives a full NRPA Conference registration package, up to \$1,000 in financial support to cover travel expenses and a ticket to attend the Academy's Annual Banquet. Each extern is paired with an Academy member serving as Mentor and a former Extern "Buddy" who help grow the young professional's network. During the course of the Conference, an extern attends various meetings, socials and educational sessions with their Mentors and/or Buddies or on their own, is introduced at the Extern Networking Reception and the Academy banquet, and given the opportunity to say a few words at the Academy General Membership Meeting. The networking opportunities alone are invaluable; and the funding affords many young professionals with the means to attend the conference.

"The Externship program is a critical element of the Academy's mission which is in part to develop the next generation of leaders for our profession. This program provides the Extern access to our profession's leaders. Within the program Externs are able to gain critical insights from Academy members ranging from professional growth and development to methods in which to ensure parks and recreation can be a critical element of a community's infrastructure and success. I have served as a mentor in this program and I am positively blown away by the energy, enthusiasm and ideas they bring and I have taken away concepts from Externs to bring to my community. This program

ensures our profession is on the road to making parks and recreation services a vital and essential service in our communities.” ~Chris Nunes (2016-2017 Academy President)

In July 1995, Peter Witt announced the selection of the first two Young Professional Externs who were chosen based on established criteria, application materials and a rating system. The inaugural recipients were Mike Benard, Pleasant Dale Park District, IL, nominated by Ernie Nance; and Tracy Taylor, Indy Parks, nominated by Leon Younger. They were paired during the Congress with Academy members Ralph Cryder and Bob Hall, and Vern Hartenburg and Jane Boubel, respectively. Mike and Tracy took advantage of the opportunity as intended and provided their endorsement for the continuation of the program.

Being a recipient of the Academy Young Professional Externship Program was an outstanding opportunity for professional growth and exposure. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting my mentors and other Academy members. It was truly inspirational to learn about the Academy and to observe such a highly dedicated and motivated group of past and present professionals. Since I have limited professional contacts outside Illinois and Indiana, I felt fortunate to make two new professional contacts outside of the Midwest. We enjoyed discussing many professional issues and topics, as well as getting to know each other personally. I would feel comfortable contacting either mentor in the future. ~Tracy Taylor (1995 Extern)

The Young Professional Externship Program served as a great opportunity for me to meet some outstanding individuals as well as get a closer look at NRPA and the Academy. Being able to spend time with professionals of my mentor’s caliber was memorable. What I found most interesting and beneficial was talking to them about the paths their careers had taken and the decisions that they made that led to their current positions. It was also beneficial to talk to them about the different aspects of their current positions, as well as their thoughts about the changes and challenges our field may face as we enter the next century. These and other opportunities provided a well-rounded and very valuable experience. Overall, I was extremely pleased and I feel very strongly that this program should be continued. ~Mike Benard (1995 Extern)

Initially, the program only accepted nominees from Academy members’ agencies. With a successful pilot in the rearview, in 1997, the AAPRA Board expanded program eligibility to include professionals who were not under the employ of Academy members, creating the potential for a larger applicant pool. This was further broadened in 2003 with the removal of the requirement that a Young Professional Externship candidate must be nominated by a member of the Academy, ushering in the open nomination and application era. The following year, Externship Committee chair Alice Conkey, reported that the change increased the number of applications significantly. The Committee would go on to expand marketing efforts to partner organizations, as well as make the application process online. These decisions naturally fostered the concepts of inclusion and equal opportunity which were advanced yet again later in the year.

The Academy has placed an importance on fostering diversity in the profession through the Externship Program. In 2004, the AAPRA Board approved a recommendation from the Diversity Task Force to increase the number of externs from two to four and dedicate two of the externships to diversity candidates, affording minorities equitable means to achieve the Externship opportunity. These were later renamed the Ernest T. Atwell Scholarships in 2007. Since implementation, the Academy has recognized over 20 diversity externs who were not only exceptional candidates, but some of the best professionals in our field. One such recipient, Dr. James Worsley (2013) is now an Academy member himself and the recipient of the 2020 NRPA Distinguished Professional Award.

When asked to reflect on their experience, here is what a couple past Externs had to say:

"The Externship experience is career-changing and a must for those that seek upward mobility in the parks and recreation field." ~James Worsley (2013 Extern)

"The Academy Externship experience changed and propelled my knowledge of the parks and recreation industry, which continuously encourages me to seek greater opportunities to contribute to our profession." ~Tiffany Johnson (2010 Extern)

Academy member Roslyn Johnson, an ambassador of diversity and equity in Parks & Recreation, values the commitment placed on diversity through the Young Professional Externship.

"For the Academy to make the conscious effort to seek out highly qualified, diverse candidates, speaks volumes about the Academy and at its core, the intentionality to be inclusive and reflective of our profession and the communities we serve" "Furthermore, as someone whose mentee was an Academy extern, the reach of this program is broad. Not only did my mentee, Tiffany Johnson, learn from the externship, she shared that knowledge with so many, myself included, and it was at this time that I really learned all about the Academy and the huge role we play in our profession. This program exemplifies pulling the chair out and inviting others to sit at the table and have a voice! Thank you, Dr. Crompton for having a vision and for the members who supported your vision, made it a reality and carry it forward today." ~Roslyn Johnson (AAPRA Class of 2017)

Following this milestone, recent Externship Committees have focused their efforts on enhancing the long-term program experience by facilitating and encouraging involvement from former Externs. At the 2014 NRPA Congress in Charlotte, NC, the Academy hosted the first ever extern "reunion", that has become the annual Extern Networking Reception, which brings past and current year Externs together with Academy members in a casual networking setting to kick-off conference. A few years later, the program introduced "Extern Buddies", assigning former Externs to assist in enriching the experience for annual recipients. As early as 2014, past recipients began assisting the Academy in various capacities, including, but not limited to, updating the past Extern contact database, helping to create and complete an impact survey, forming a Past Extern Google networking group and assisting with the matching of externs and buddies.

As of 2019, the Academy has presented the Young Professional Externship Scholarship to 73 outstanding individuals. Many of these professionals have gone on to accomplish great feats; leading the profession and receiving recognition for exemplary contributions. Collectively the group is represented by those who have received promotions and awards, served professional organizations, had published work and presented at the highest levels. 2020, in particular, was a great year for past Externs on the national level yielding the following highlights:

- NRPA Distinguished Professional Award - Dr. James Worsley (2013)
- NRPA Robert W. Crawford Young Professional Award - Anthony Iracki (2019)
- NRPA National Awards and Scholarship Committee Chair - John Stutzman (2017)
- NRPA Young Professional Network Chair – Michael Biedenstein (2017)

The list above is just a fraction of the successes had by past Externs. In November 2018, a team consisting of Academy members and former Externs conducted an impact survey which was designed to measure the value and impact of the program on participants over time. Dr. Jean Keller analyzed the results and authored *The Value of the American Academy for Park & Recreation Administration Externship Program* report which identified key findings in relation to determining the effects of participation. Some of the most notable identified impacts of participation include:

- Related to career progression: development of professional relationships and/or friendships; encouragement in professional development; position changes and/or promotions; and pursuit of

additional degrees. 69% of respondents are currently serving in a higher position than they were at the time of their Externship.

"I still keep in touch with many of the mentors and AAPRA members that I met as part of my Extern experience, over 5 years ago. The career advice I received during the Externship is still as relevant today as it was then. The connections built during the Externship have led me to work with Academy members as co-presenters at conferences, collaborators on new ideas, and coconspirators for tackling challenging issues. The Externship afforded me tools and connections that have helped to shape me into a more experienced professional."

~Kathy Capps (2013 Extern)

- Increased career related leadership roles in professional and other organizations: Externs received support and encouragement to apply for these positions, initial connections with professional organizations, and nominations for leadership positions from Academy members. Over 85% of respondents have held such a position.

In its 25-year existence, the Young Professional Externship Program has truly been able to achieve its original intention and goal; to identify and develop future leaders. As the Academy celebrates 40 years, this program has meant a great deal to a lot of people and has instilled young professionals with confidence, pride and aspiration. As of 2019, three former Externs (Carrie Fullerton, Walt Bratton and Dr. James Worsley) have become Academy members and it is fair to say this number will grow. Carrie was recently elected to the AAPRA Board of Directors. One shared a wonderful sentiment encompassing the program's essence:

"Participation in the Academy's Externship program provided me with significant exposure to our industry's top professionals and educators, knowledge about NRPA's operations and a network of people who have been able to assist me in advancing at every stage of my career. Eighteen years later, as a current Academy member, I continue to be grateful for this experience!" ~Anonymous

It was my absolute pleasure to be awarded an Academy Externship in Atlanta, 2011. As I reflect on the experience, I can remember the feeling of being a part of something much bigger than I was aware of at the time. It was exciting and somewhat intimidating at the same time. My first interaction as part of the program came with one of my mentors, Mark Young. His passion and knowledge were inspiring and that interaction has stayed with me throughout my career. Over the course of that week, I seized the opportunity to interact with a number of Academy members who I stay in touch with and look forward to seeing at conference every year, if not sooner. I recall the banquet that year and making my way to my table where I was greeted by Tom Schuster in an oversized cowboy hat. This experience is one of my fondest memories and everyone was, and always is, so welcoming. My Externship has been one of the most invaluable experiences of my career. Almost 10 years removed, I have gone on to create relationships with dozens of Academy members and find myself working with many of them on panels and projects like the very piece you are reading. Serving as an Extern Buddy over the past several years, I have been able to pay it forward as a mentor and stay connected. A few years ago, while serving as a Buddy, my very own Externship came around full circle as I found myself sitting down to a networking breakfast with my Extern and his Academy mentor, Mark Young, one of my original mentors. The Academy is an extraordinary group of individuals with extraordinary accomplishments in the field of Parks and Recreation. Through the Externship Program, AAPRA does an excellent job of recognizing exceptional young professionals and providing them with the tools to become future leaders of our profession.

Respectfully,
Thomas Venniro (2011)