

AN IMPORTANCE-PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF SELECTED PROGRAMS IN THE ■ NATIONAL CENTER ■ FOR RECREATION AND CONSERVATION

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In 1998, the National Center for Recreation and Conservation (NCRC) of the National Park Service, with West Virginia University, conducted a study to assess satisfaction of NCRC cooperators, in compliance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The NCRC surveyed its cooperators in the following programs: (1) Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA), (2) National Heritage Areas (NHA), (3) Federal Lands-to-Parks (FLP), and (4) Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR) programs. The RTCA program helps communities plan greenways, conserve rivers, and develop new trails through voluntary partnerships that emphasize local ownership and involvement. The NHA program advises community leaders in 18 National Heritage Areas on partnership strategies for conserving cultural and natural resources. The FLP program helps state and local agencies acquire, at no cost, surplus federal land and facilities for parks and recreation. The WSR program is responsible for the management of four wild and scenic “partnership” rivers. This program is responsible ensuring resource protection and partnership goals are met.

■ Purpose and study design

The purpose of the study was to assess the level of satisfaction among “cooperators” who had received a “substantial” level of assistance or services from the four NCRC programs during the 1998 federal fiscal year. Survey recipients were “primary contacts” for each project and primary cooperator organization that received assistance or services from the respective NCRC programs. Each program established criteria unique to their particular set of services to define substantial levels of assistance.

An Importance-Performance (I-P) technique was used. The assistance activities of each NCRC program were seg-

mented into specific elements for which the importance and satisfaction ratings among served cooperators were elicited. The basic assumption underlying the I-P technique is that overall program satisfaction is an aggregate of the satisfaction level for each program element relative to its importance. By acquiring meaningful feedback on the importance and performance of each program element, the NCRC could better target its efforts in meeting long-term performance goals.

The items of
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Each NCRC program developed a list of elements, and given the unique purposes of each program, it was clear that a different list was required for each program. While many elements were applicable to all four program questionnaires (e.g., assistance with developing a vision, mission, goals, and action plans), other items applied specifically to only one or two programs. The elements were arrayed in a question set for which respondents were asked to assess in terms of the importance of each to their project, and their level of satisfaction with the delivery of each item. A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the level of importance (1 = Very Unimportant, 5 = Very Important) and satisfaction (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied).

The I-P approach identifies priorities for each element of each of the evaluated programs contingent upon the element’s position in a four-quadrant matrix. The “Keep Up the Good Work” quadrant includes program elements cooperators rated as highly important to their particular project, and also rated highly in terms of their satisfaction with the program’s delivery of those elements. The “Concentrate Here” quadrant contains elements of high importance to cooperators but on which the program’s performance was low. Program elements of low importance to cooperators but were well delivered fall into the “Possible Overkill” quadrant. Finally, the “Low Priority” quadrant contains items that were of low importance but

for which cooperator satisfaction levels were comparatively low.

The study represents a census survey of all program cooperators, thus a questionnaire was mailed to each. Databases were obtained from each program group that included the names, mailing addresses, and various types of program information. The program populations included 162 RTCA cooperators, 11 NHA cooperators, 4 WSR cooperators, and 87 FLP cooperators. Population sizes, responses, and actual response rates for each program are shown in table 1. The first mailing was sent in November of 1998. In order to attain the target response rate, follow-up reminders and a second mailing were sent out on a schedule prescribed by Dillman. The cutoff date for returned questionnaires was April 15, 1999. Response rates, which ranged from 80% for FLP to 100% for WSR, are considered excellent by all estimations and criteria (Dillman 1978). Table 2 on page 32 lists the assistance activities of each NCRC program that were evaluated; the number for each activity corresponds to the numbered data plotted in figures 1–4.

Table 1.
National Center for Recreation and Conservation GPRA
Survey: Population Size, Responses, and Response Rates.

Program	Population Size	Responses	Response Rate
RTCA	162	143	88%
FLP	87	70	80%
NHA	11	9	82%
WSR	4	4	100%

Findings

Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program

In general, a strong positive relationship ($r=0.74$) was observed between importance and satisfaction scores for RTCA program elements (figure 1). In other words, the items of highest importance among RTCA cooperators received the highest satisfaction scores. From a service delivery perspective, this indicates a visceral understanding among RTCA personnel about which program elements are most important to cooperators, and thus they have developed their capacity for excellence in these areas. Conversely, the program performed least well on elements of least importance, indicating program efficiency by not wasting resources on elements unimportant to cooperators.

Generally, elements of highest importance and satisfaction tended to relate to organizational development and capacity building, while less important and less well delivered items related to information and evaluation of resources. Program elements in the Keep Up the Good

Work quadrant of the I-P matrix included: developing a vision, mission, and goals; ensuring support and involvement from relevant interest groups; assuring support from the community; facilitating meetings; providing information about the experience of other groups; guidance in developing publications and graphic materials; and fulfilling commitments made to the project.

Three items were rated highly important, but did not receive high satisfaction ratings. Items in this Concentrate Here quadrant included: developing the capacity of the organization; providing information on trail development; and helping to secure possible funding sources.

Five items relating to provision of information were rated in the Low Priority or Possible Overkill quadrants. This suggests that relative to the other program services offered by RTCA, providing information (items 7, 9, 10, 11, 12) was seen as neither a high priority nor particularly well delivered. It appears that RTCA cooperators may look to other sources of information while appreciating the one-on-one assistance RTCA can provide them in developing the direction and capacity of their organizations. Other items that fall into these quadrants include site evaluation (6) and overcoming problems and crises (16). The fact that only one item—provision of information on interpretation and education—fell into the Possible Overkill quadrant again suggests that the agency has done a good job at not devoting a disproportionate of resources on low priority items.

Federal Lands-to-Parks

A moderately strong positive correlation ($r=0.57$) was found between importance and satisfaction scores for FLP services (figure 2, page 33). While the program is doing a

Figure 1. Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program

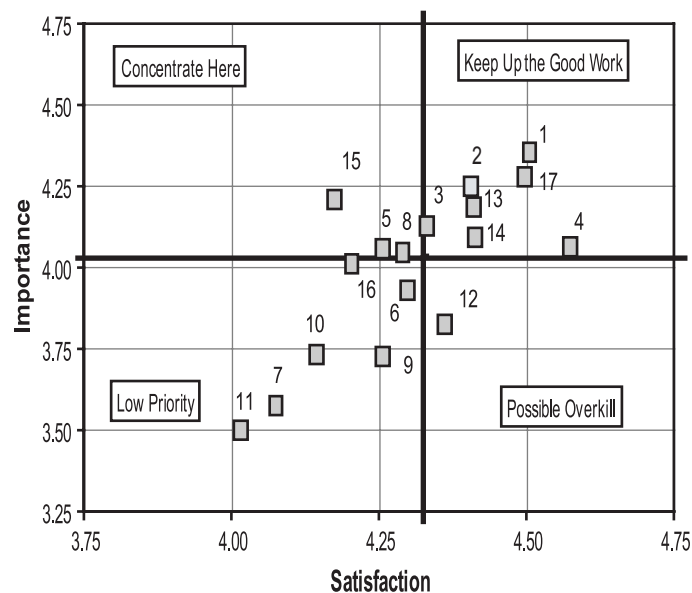
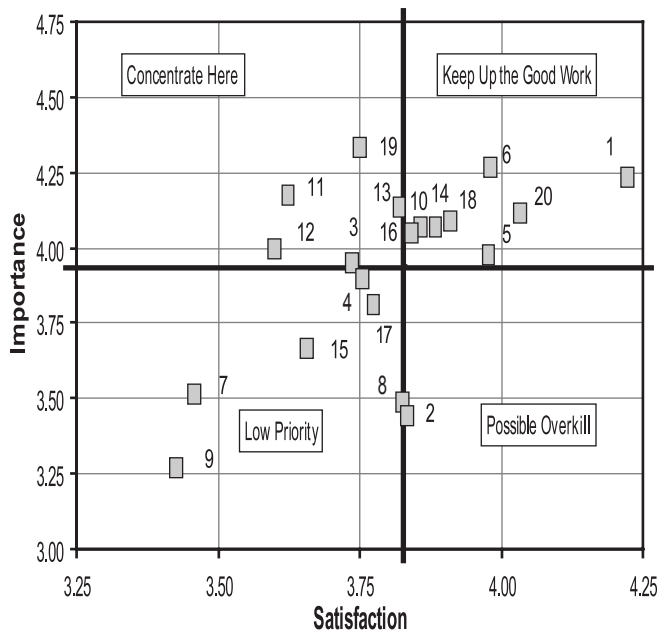


Table 2.

Importance-Performance Quadrants for Four Programs in the National Center for Recreation and Conservation

	Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance	Federal Lands-to-Parks	National Heritage Areas	Wild and Scenic Rivers
Keep Up the Good Work	4 Assistance with facilitation of meetings 1 Assistance with developing a vision, mission, goals, or action plan 17 Fulfilling the commitments made to the project in a timely manner 13 Providing information about the perspectives and experiences of other organizations with similar projects 14 Guidance on developing publications and graphic materials 2 Ensuring support and involvement from relevant interest groups, officials, and organizations 3 Assuring support from the community	1 Assistance with understanding the procedures, requirements, and general process of the FLP Program 20 Availability and extent of involvement by FLP staff 6 Communicating stewardship requirements, processes, or issues 5 Providing information on points of contact and other related agency programs 18 Overcoming unexpected problems, obstacles, or crises 14 Assistance in developing or reviewing third-party operating or use agreements 10 Assistance in preparing FLP application materials 16 Assistance in promoting and supporting your proposal with other agencies or organizations	6 Administering federal funds made available to your NHA 10 Fulfilling NPS commitments made to the project in a timely manner 1 Providing technical information about heritage area development 5 Involving other organizations and agencies that can assist your NHA 3 Helping your organization develop annual and long-range work plans	16 Overcoming unexpected problems, obstacles, or crises 14 Guidance on developing publications and graphic materials 15 Identifying, suggesting, or helping to secure other possible funding sources 17 Fulfilling the commitments made to the project in a timely manner
Concentrate Here	8 Providing information on trail development 5 Assistance with developing the capacity of your organization to undertake the project 15 Identifying, suggesting, or helping to secure other possible funding sources	13 Assistance with proposed changes in land use for acquired properties 19 Fulfilling the commitments made to the project in a timely manner 3 Identification of and notification about available property 11 Preparing property deeds and transferring property 12 Assistance in modifying or enhancing acquired properties	7 Identifying, suggesting, or helping to secure possible funding sources	5 Assistance with developing the capacity of your organization to undertake the project 6 Identifying or evaluating natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources that are worthy of protection, restoration, or interpretation 9 Providing information on river conservation 12 Providing information on interpretation and education 7 Providing information on protection strategies for natural resources 10 Providing information on open space protection 11 Providing information on protection strategies for cultural resources 13 Providing information about the perspectives and experiences of other organizations with similar projects
Low Priority	6 Identifying or evaluating natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources that are worthy of protection, restoration, or interpretation 9 Providing information on river conservation 16 Overcoming unexpected problems, obstacles, or crises 10 Providing information on open space protection 7 Providing information on protection strategies for natural resources 11 Providing information on protection strategies for cultural resources	8 Assistance in developing justification for parks, recreation, or conservation 17 Adding credibility to your project with other agencies or organization 4 Providing information on land acquisition or military base reuse processes 15 Assistance in considering alternative methods or strategies for achieving objectives 7 Identifying or evaluating natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources on the property that are worthy of protection, restoration, or interpretation 9 Assistance in planning the use of property for public use	12 Providing information about the perspectives and experiences of other organizations with similar projects 2 Fostering nonfinancial growth and development of your organization 11 Overcoming unexpected problems, obstacles, or crises	1 Assistance with developing a vision, mission, goals, or action plan 3 Assuring support from the community 8 Providing information on trail development
Possible Overkill	12 Providing information on interpretation and education	2 Assistance with developing a vision, mission, goals, or action plan	9 Assistance with developing publications and graphic materials 4 Providing information about other federal programs that can assist in NHA protection and development 8 Identifying or evaluating natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources that are worthy of protection, restoration, or interpretation	4 Assistance with facilitation of meetings 2 Ensuring support and involvement from relevant interest groups, officials, and organizations

Figure 2. Federal Lands to Parks Program



good job of developing excellence in areas of highest importance to their cooperators and de-emphasizing items of low importance, six items fell in either the Concentrate Here or Possible Overkill categories. This suggests that for nearly a third of the program elements, the organization is not dedicating sufficient attention or is supporting the element beyond its importance.

In many ways, the FLP findings are in stark contrast to RTCA, suggesting a far different clientele with different service priorities. Unlike the results for RTCA, FLP cooperators seem most interested in, and were most satisfied with assistance they received regarding the “nuts and bolts” of the project. For example, items in the Keep up the Good Work quadrant included: assistance with understanding procedures, requirements, and general processes; providing information on points of contact and other related agency programs; communicating stewardship requirements, processes, and issues; preparation with application materials; development or reviewing third-party operating or use agreements; promoting or supporting the proposal with other agencies; overcoming unexpected problems and crises; and availability and extent of involvement by FLP staff.

The Concentrate Here quadrant also contained items related to the specifics of project completion: identification of and notification about available property; preparing property deeds and transferring property; modifying or enhancing acquired properties; assistance with proposed changes in land use for the properties; and fulfilling the commitments made to the project in a timely manner. It appears that FLP cooperators expect the program to be both an advocate for the property transfer within the federal government and the source of technical legal help in accomplishing the transfer.

Also in contrast with RTCA was the finding of Low Priority for items relating to developing their organization or building public support for the project: developing justification for park and recreation uses of the property; building credibility for the project with other agencies or organizations; providing information on land acquisition or military base reuse processes; alternative strategies for achieving objectives; site evaluation; and planning for public use of the property.

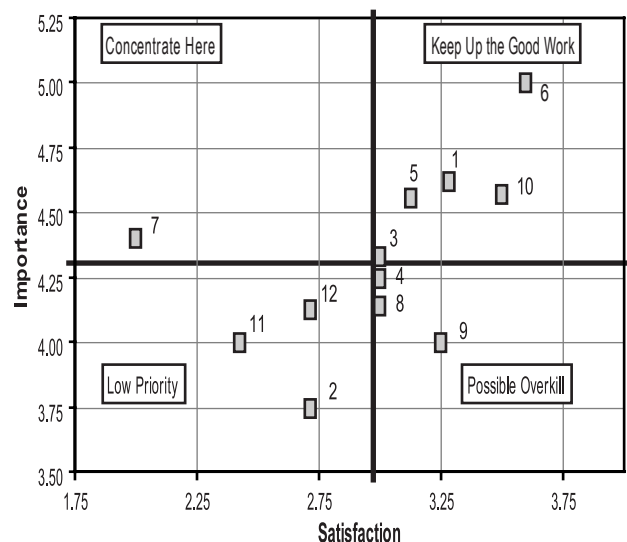
Lastly, assistance with developing the cooperator organization’s vision, mission and goals were well delivered, but not viewed as particularly important, and thus fell in the Possible Overkill quadrant. FLP cooperators may have a well-defined and focused mission—acquiring a specific piece of property—and can therefore look to the organization for direct assistance in making the acquisition happen.

National Heritage Areas

In general, relatively high importance ratings among NHA cooperators suggest that the forms of assistance or services provided by the program were consistent with cooperators’ priorities (figure 3). Even though the NHA program sustained the lowest mean satisfaction score of the four programs—2.97 across all program elements included in the I-P analysis—their overall results were positive.

Conversely, a moderately strong positive correlation ($r=0.52$) was found between importance and satisfaction ratings, with only four items falling in the Concentrate Here or Possible Overkill categories. This suggests that the organization is doing a good job at targeting resources to the most important program elements, and is not committing unnecessary resources to items of low importance.

Figure 3. National Heritage Areas Program



Five of the twelve items fell into the Keep Up the Good Work quadrant. In contrast to RTCA and FLP, these items generally relate to managing and sustaining the projects over the long term, and include: providing technical information about heritage area development; helping the organization develop annual and long-range plans; involving other organizations that can be of assistance; administration of federal funds made available to their heritage area; and fulfilling commitments made to the project.

The one item in the Concentrate Here quadrant also relates to long-term program management: securing other sources of funding. The average satisfaction score on this item was 2.0, which was the lowest for any element of all four programs. Like the other cooperators, these respondents placed a high priority on securing additional funding sources, and expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with NHA in this regard.

Three items fell into the Low Priority category: provision of information about other organizations; fostering the nonfinancial growth and development of the organization; and overcoming unexpected problems. Three items fell into the Possible Overkill category: site evaluation; developing publications; and provision of information about other federal programs that may assist their project.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

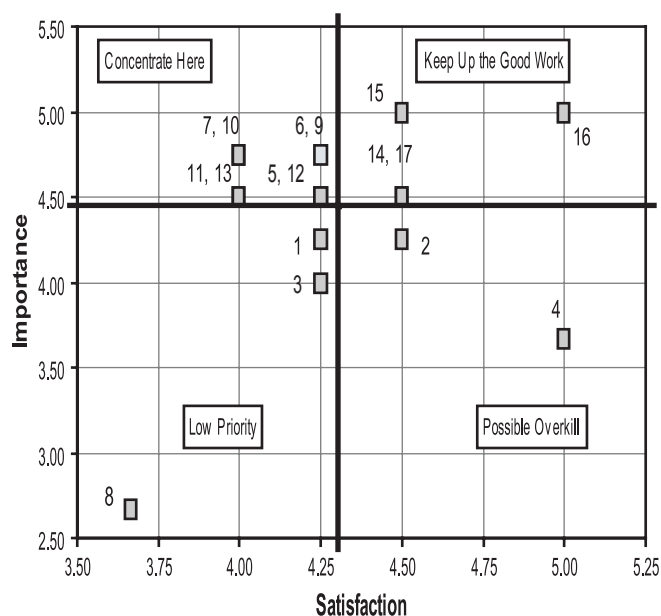
The rivers used in this study represent four “partnership rivers” served by the WSR program. These four rivers are only a small portion of 34 segments and over 2,600 miles of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System administered by the National Park Service. Because of the extremely small population size, the WSR results should be viewed with caution. Nonetheless, as a complete census of the four program participants, the findings are illuminating (figure 4).

A comparatively weak correlation ($r=0.27$) was observed between importance and satisfaction scores for WSR program elements. This finding could be a result from either low population size or extremely high importance and satisfaction ratings by WSR cooperators. Nonetheless, eight of the seventeen items fell in the Concentrate Here category, suggesting that the organization is not committing sufficient attention to these items.

No meaningful connection was observed among the four items in the Keep up the Good Work quadrant: guidance on developing publications; securing other funding sources; overcoming unexpected problems; and fulfilling commitments made to the project.

However, unlike the other three program groups, WSR cooperators place high importance on resource evaluation and information, but were relatively less satisfied with assistance received in these areas. Items falling into this Concentrate Here quadrant included: developing the

Figure 4. Wild and Scenic Rivers Program



capacity of your organization; site evaluation; providing information on protection strategies for natural resources; providing information on river conservation; providing information on open space protection; providing information on protection strategies for cultural resources; providing information on interpretation and education; and providing information on other organizations with similar projects.

Falling into the Low Priority quadrant were: developing vision, mission, goals; building support within the community; and provision of information on trail development. Cooperators placed a low priority on trail development; however, this is a service the WSR program does not emphasize. Two items fell into the Possible Overkill quadrant: assistance with facilitating meetings and enlisting relevant interest groups.

Discussion

With few exceptions, both importance and satisfaction scores suggest a high level of support for and fulfillment of the services delivered. NCRC program staff should be congratulated for having a very good sense of the program elements important to their constituents and delivering on these items.

Of the items common across the four programs, few similarities emerged. For instance, while assistance with developing a vision and mission was viewed as important and well delivered by RTCA participants, it was seen as a low priority or possible overkill by FLP and WSR. This demonstrates the vastly different constituency needs and interests across the four programs, along with the ability of each program group to customize their services to the specific needs of their constituency.

Three of the four programs (RTCA, FLP, and NHA) viewed identification and evaluation of site resources as a low priority. Only WSR placed a relatively high value on its provision. Of the three programs that included assistance with obtaining funding as an item, two (RTCA and NHA) viewed the service as highly important, but were relatively dissatisfied with its delivery. Thus, two general recommendations are given. First, it appears that the NCRC programs should generally de-emphasize site identification and evaluation as a program service. With the exception of the WSR program, this capacity is not highly valued by constituents. Second, NCRC should place a greater focus on assisting constituents with identifying funding strategies and sources for their programs. One way this could be accomplished would be to build expertise on funding sources within the National Center for Recreation and Conservation and field offices. There are several organizations that focus on helping small nonprofits with issues related to fund-raising, grant writing, and financing. Perhaps formal relationships could be developed with these organizations for the purpose of assisting NCRC cooperators with this vexing problem.

Finally, National Park Service programs such as the NCRC are being held more accountable to the public for both the efficacy and efficiency of their operations. The Importance-Performance technique is a useful evaluation tool for disaggregating and evaluating multidimensional organizations comprised of various program delivery elements. Methods of statistical analysis are relatively simple, and are presented visually for straightforward interpretation. As such, the I-P technique has broad applicability to a wide variety of agencies and organizations. PS

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