Eliminating Community Services—
The Leisure Services Example

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Introduction

Just as a crust of barnacles on the hold of a ship retards the vessel’s movement, so do a number of worn out programmes in an agency’s mix of services adversely affect the agency’s effectiveness in delivering desired leisure services.  

All community services have life cycles. That is, in response to the demands of their clientele, programmes typically pass through phases of Introduction, Take-Off, Maturation, Saturation and Decline.  

These stages are shown in Figure 1.) Acceptance of this concept implies a recognition that no community programme or service can be expected to deliver high levels of satisfaction to a large proportion of its targeted clientele forever. Demand for a particular service will decrease over time as lifestyles and interests change.

Leisure service agencies generally make a considerable effort to develop appropriate new services to meet new demands stemming from changes in interest, but typically they devote much less attention to eliminating existing services which are no longer viable. It appears to be much easier to add new programmes than to remove existing programmes. Creating new programmes is seen as a positive response to change. In contrast, the deletion of existing programmes is frequently perceived as a depressing negative task with connotations of failure associated with it. However, in spite of the widespread reluctance to recognize programmes as much a function of pruning.

Since the demise of programmes, agencies have not developed well weak programmes. There appears to be a need having to take decisive action to mushroom over a period of time pruning.

Elimination of an existing leisure programmes takes place in various ways. First, elimination takes place when the continuance of the programme is not a part of the agency’s commitment. Second, elimination takes place whenever the agency is subjected to strong pressure to change, without proportionally increasing its resources. This requires leisure service agencies to re-examine their current programmes, including food programmes, counselling services, and leisure counselling services. The agency must re-examine its priorities and determine which programmes should be deleted.

Advantages of a Formal Elimination

For every new programme which resource levels are allocated, resources are reallocated to existing programmes. This means that an agency is able to allocate its resources more efficiently. The retention of marginal, less effective programmes in order to have a larger range of programmes reduces the overall efficiency of the agency. The retention of marginal programmes makes it difficult to develop new programmes that are more effective and efficient.

The Pareto Principle, sometimes called the 80/20 rule, states that a small proportion of an agency’s resources are devoted to serving a small proportion of the population. This large number of programmes, which are more or less equally effective, serves to dilute management efforts by focusing on programmes that are less effective.
widespread reluctance to recognise it, the viability of a leisure service agency’s mix of programmes is as much a function of paring as it is of proliferating new programmes.9

Since the demise of programmes is ultimately inevitable, it is surprising that most agencies have not developed well thought out policies or strategies for eliminating weak programmes. There appears to be hope that they will fade away without management having to take decisive action. Historically, the range of services offered tends to mushroom over a period of time unless a definitive management effort is made at pruning.4

Elimination of an existing leisure programme appears to take place in one of three ways. First, elimination takes place when participation falls to such a level that continuance of the programme is a conspicuous embarrassment to the agency.8 The very presence of such programmes may suggest that the agency is unable to develop stimulating programmes to service people’s wants, and existing programmes contribute to the agency’s poor image. This situation may arise from a variety of circumstances. Another provider, for example from the commercial sector, may start offering a competitive programme which attracts some of the public agency’s clientele, making it less necessary for the public agency to offer the programme. Alternatively, changing tastes or life styles may cause a programme’s demise.

Second, elimination takes place when an external crisis imposes financial constraints which force the agency to reduce its range of services. The current citizen dissatisfaction with high levels of taxation, which has been most dramatically manifested by the passing of Proposition 13 in California, has created the financial environment for such a crisis-inspired house-cleaning. Third, programme elimination may take place when an agency is subjected to strong pressures to substantially broaden its range of services, without proportionally increasing its budget. At this time, many communities are requiring leisure services to take over a much broader range of social programmes, including food programmes for children and senior citizens; general counselling services; leisure counselling, etc. In order to accommodate these demands, the agency must re-examine its priorities and determine which, if any, of its existing programmes should be deleted.

Advantages of a Formal Elimination Strategy

For every new programme which is introduced, assuming that no additional resources are allocated, resources have to be taken from an existing programme or programmes. This means that an agency’s financial resources must be distributed more thinly over a larger range of programmes. The likely result of reducing funding for existing programmes in order to fund new programmes is a lower quality of service overall. The retention of marginal programmes constitutes a significant barrier to increased levels of service and lessens the agency’s ability to adapt to a changing environment.6

The Pareto Principle, sometimes termed the 80/20 law, indicates it is likely that a small proportion of an agency’s services account for a large proportion of the overall satisfaction and attendance generated. This principle suggests that it may be possible to remove many programmes without having very much impact on clientele groups. This large number of programmes, which contribute relatively little in overall benefits, serves to dilute management efforts and divert resources from healthy, existing programmes and potentially rewarding new programmes.


5. Ibid., p. 111.

The advantages of reducing the proliferation of programmes stem from the observation that, 
"as the (number of programmes) increase numerically, the range of management problems seem to grow geometrically."
7 Programme overpopulation spreads an agency's financial, management, and marketing resources thin. Some programmes with undeveloped potential are undoubtedly ignored. Incipient problems with mature programmes similarly go undetected. Even new programmes fail to receive the close attention that they demand.

Since the major cost centre of most public leisure service agencies is personnel, management time is the major resource which has to be allocated. Elimination of some services releases management time which can be reallocated. The effort required to sustain weak programmes frequently is disproportionate to the benefits that those programmes yield.8 Unfortunately, this over-allocation of time on weak programmes is seldom reflected in expenses actually assigned to the programme because it often goes unrecognised.

Even if a programme is being well-received by a fairly substantial clientele, the agency might still be better off without it because of its opportunity cost. The opportunity cost of a service is the clientele satisfaction and revenues that a new programme could produce if the effort and resources being allocated to the existing programme were redirected.9 A programme may be serving a clientele group successfully, but the critical question which must be asked of each programme is, "Could the resources allocated to this programme generate greater total satisfaction to the community if they were reallocated?" Only if there is an excess of resources not being used, or if no new programme or service opportunities are feasible, should an existing programme be excused from undergoing some form of opportunity cost analysis.

It has been suggested that the biggest cost imposed by carrying weak services may well be in the future.10 By not being eliminated at the proper time, these programmes delay the aggressive search for replacement programmes. This may lead to an agency having a lopsided range of programmes, which is long on "yesterday's bread winners" and short on "tomorrow's bread winners".11 Hence, outdated programmes weaken an agency's foothold on the future.

An additional benefit of adopting a structured elimination strategy is that it forces management to be concerned with why services have failed. This lesson may be learned that will reduce the rate of new programme failures in the future.

**Reasons Why Programme Elimination is Often Ignored**

Despite the evidence suggesting that elimination of programmes should be a regular formalised process, such a procedure is rarely found. There appear to be two main reasons why ailing programmes are permitted to continue. These are personal or political considerations and a lack of information.

Established programmes or services have a tendency to become sacrosanct. They are retained because of inertia, management sentiment, or the influence of vested interests. Inertia is a tempting alternative for it avoids controversy or confrontation. Frequently, leisure service managers may have subjective and personal biases or feelings of affinity towards particular services and programmes, which cause them to be reluctant to recognise that a particular service no longer represents the best use of an agency's resources. In such cases, sentiments about decision making process and lead to viewpoint reviews programmes under less than existing programmes, because circumstances, however, vested programmes. In such cases an opportunity may arise to appease a member of some other influential person group.

A sense of guilt often surrounds the question. Frequently, the answer depends on the elimination strategy. No particular circumstances in which programmes should be given another opportunity.

Many times managers are so used to the costs that result from the lack of demand apparent only after careful examination of the range of existing programmes by more productive programmes management thinks of this as "tomorrow. This is why a decision is established.12

The lack of performance criteria makes it quite likely that weak programmes discussed in the following section were available, the data required on not be available. Relevant data include:

* The costs of offering that may be limited to direct administrative overhead. Overhead expenses are likely to be large which may replace that which is taken
* The numbers of clientele over periods.
* A measure of the level of programme.
* The numbers and profiles other suppliers in the community.
* A projection of the cost of future costs
* A projection of the likelihood of decreasing the opportunity cost

**Procedure for Eliminating**

Perhaps the most fundamental reason is the absence in most agencies of efforts at deletion brought on by agency funding, are generally in need...
resources. In such cases, sentiment may become a powerful influence in the decision-making process and lead to weak programmes being retained. When a new manager reviews programmes under his or her jurisdiction, frequently there is a pruning of existing programmes, because a more disinterested evaluation of them is made. Sometimes, however, vested interests seek to perpetuate particular existing programmes. In such cases an objective evaluation may be overruled by the political necessity to appease a member of the city council, the recreation and park board, or some other influential person or group.

A sense of guilt often surrounds the discussion of abandoning a particular programme. The question invariably arises, "Did we give it a decent chance to succeed?" Frequently, the answer depends on whether or not the agency has a functioning elimination strategy. No particular programme can ever receive a "fair chance" under circumstances in which programmes that should be deleted are retained in order to be given another opportunity.  

Many times managers are simply unaware that a programme is ailing. Most of the costs that result from the lack of an effective elimination procedure are hidden and become apparent only after careful analysis. As a result they are overlooked. The need to examine the range of existing programmes to discover those which can be replaced by more productive programmes rarely assumes the urgency of a crisis. Too often management thinks of this as something that should be done, but that can wait until tomorrow. This is why a definite procedure for programme deletion should be established.  

The lack of performance criteria or evaluation efforts in recreation and parks makes it quite likely that weak programmes will remain undetected. This problem is discussed in the following section of this paper. However, even if performance criteria were available, the data required to assess the programme against these criteria may not be available. Relevant data may include:

1. The costs of offering that service both now and in past time periods. These costs may be limited to direct costs attributable to the programme but they may include an extra amount to cover departmental overhead and/or central city administrative overhead. The rationale for considering only direct costs is that overhead expenses are likely to be constant for any programme or service which might replace that which is currently being offered.

2. The numbers of clientele served in the programme both now and in past time periods.

3. A measure of the level of satisfaction which the clientele are receiving from the programme.

4. The numbers and profiles of clientele supporting similar programmes offered by other suppliers in the community both now and in past time periods.

5. A projection of future costs and future benefits of offering the service.

6. A projection of the likelihood of other suppliers in the community expanding or decreasing the opportunities they provide.

**Procedure for Eliminating Services**

Perhaps the most fundamental reason why programme elimination is often ignored is the absence in most agencies of a formal deletion philosophy and procedure. Ad hoc efforts at deletion brought on by a sudden crisis, such as a substantial reduction in agency funding, are generally inadequate and invariably overdue. A procedure must be

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built into the management of existing programmes which guarantees that each one is inspected carefully on a periodic basis.

Before a procedure can be formulated, the people within the agency who will be responsible for implementing the procedure must be assigned. The programme elimination procedure will often require unpleasant and unpopular decisions to be made, so it is important to clearly delineate specific responsibility.

A three stage procedure is suggested for eliminating programmes. The three stages are: (1) identification of those programmes which should be considered for elimination; (2) evaluation of each programme and determination of whether elimination is the best strategy or whether there are superior alternative strategies; and (3) implementation of the decision. Each of these stages is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Identification of Possible Candidates for Elimination

Three practical methods are available for identifying programmes which should be considered for elimination. They are: a programme life cycle audit; an index of efficiency measure; and direct respondent input from surveys. In each case, the data should be compared with some predetermined objectively established performance criteria.

The programme life cycle audit is based on the concept that all programmes pass through a life cycle. The audit requires that the present life cycle stage of each of the agency’s programmes be identified. To do this, historical data of attendance at each programme should be used, going back to the beginning of the programme if possible to fix its present position on its life cycle curve. In order to identify a true life cycle pattern, data have to be adjusted to allow for population changes. Thus, a ratio such as attendance per thousand population may be most appropriate. Similarly, the data should be adjusted to remove the impact of any major changes in the cost of admission to participants in the programme. A detailed discussion of this approach may be found elsewhere.

This method may also be used to provide a basis for future programme planning by identifying those programmes which seem likely to be candidates for elimination in the future. To achieve this, it is necessary to check recent trends in the number and nature of competitors offering a similar or substitute programme. These competitors may be other public agencies such as community education programmes, private groups, or the commercial sector. Finally, programme participation should be projected over the next three to five years, based upon all of the information available.

Once the life cycle position of each programme has been identified and projected forward three to five years, the agency has a profile of where its programmes are currently located and where they are likely to be located in the future. Clearly, those programmes which are shown to be located in the Saturation or Decline stages of their life cycle are those which should be subject to evaluation as possible candidates for elimination.

An index of efficiency measure consists of a group of output ratios which can be calculated and viewed in total. In the past, measures of evaluation of leisure services have tended to focus more on inputs such as the number of acres of land, the number of facilities, and the number of  outputs such as the number of services. Hatry et al. suggest that this provide the following illustrations.

Type 1 Output in units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acres (or square feet of facilities) for various types of facilities such as soccer fields, pool levels, or other characteristics at different locations. If work is measured in the form “ratio of standard hours per dollar would be appropriate.”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours of operation for facilities.</td>
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Type 2 Output in units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance (or visit) days of use for facilities.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Estimated number of different (once a year) per dollar, per dollar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costs of the programme have and it may be a prime deletion of facilities.</td>
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Type 3 Utilization Measure

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<th>Major-equipment in-commitment days in equipment-days.</th>
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| Percentage of time facilities are calculated for individual facilities.

The overriding concern of a particular clientele groups within surveys offers the best means of obtaining the services being offered. Community-wide survey which include participants, as well as those with the purpose of the programme eliminate those who participate and those who are most useful. Such a survey may measure satisfaction with a particular programme. For example, an ailing programme satisfaction reported by participants.

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of facilities, and the number of arts-and-crafts programmes provided, rather than on outputs such as the number of persons served and their satisfaction with those services. Harty et al. suggest that three types of efficiency measures may be used. They provide the following illustrations of each of these three types:

**Type 1 Output in units of workload ÷ Input**
Acres (or square feet of facility) maintained (mowed, cleaned, etc.) per dollar, for various types of facilities. (If comparisons are made between facilities, adjustments are likely to be needed to account for differences in terrain, use levels, or other characteristics that lead to different maintenance requirements at different locations. If work standards are developed for different locations, the form “ratio of standard hours accomplished per employee-hour actually applied” would be appropriate.)

Number of hours of operation per dollar, for individual programmes or facilities.

**Type 2 Output in units of “effectiveness” ÷ Input**
Attendance (or visit) days per dollar, perhaps for individual programmes or facilities.

Estimated number of different households using recreation services (at least once a year) per dollar, perhaps for individual programmes or facilities (these estimates could be based on the participation rates obtained in an annual citizen survey).

If the subsidy per user has increased beyond an acceptable level, that is, the costs of the programme have increased or levels of participation have declined, it may be a prime deletion candidate.

**Type 3 Utilization Measures**
Major-equipment in-commission rates (perhaps calculated as the total number of equipment-days in commission divided by the total potential number of equipment-days).

Percentage of time facilities are closed for maintenance (percentages should be calculated for individual facilities such as swimming pools and tennis courts).

The overriding concern of a public agency is the satisfaction of the community and particular clientele groups within the community. Direct respondent input from surveys offers the best means of considering community and clientele satisfaction with the services being offered. Community-wide satisfaction can be measured by a community-wide survey which includes the views of residents who are not programme participants, as well as those who are programme participants. However, for the purpose of the programme elimination procedure, a regular survey which samples those who participate and those who have dropped out of a programme is probably the most useful. Such a survey may provide information regarding current levels of satisfaction with a particular programme as well as changes in users’ satisfaction levels. For example, an ailing programme may be identified by a reduction in the level of satisfaction reported by participants compared to previous years. Alternatively, loss of

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*a This can be further split into more detailed work components to provide such measures as “acres of grass mowed per employee-hour”, “number of trees maintained per employee-hour”, “tons of litter removed per employee-hour”, and “pieces of playground equipment maintained per dollar”.


satisfaction may be indicated by responses from those who formerly participated in the programme stating that they were in some way dissatisfied with the existing programme, found a superior substitute, or have simply grown tired of the programme.

Constant monitoring through the use of these evaluative devices, preferably in combination, will identify which programmes are appropriate for elimination consideration. This first stage of the procedure for eliminating services seeks only to identify programmes for which elimination should be considered a possibility. Their identification at this point does not mean that they should be eliminated.

**Evaluation of Programmes**

Once candidates for elimination have been identified they must be evaluated to determine if indeed elimination is indicated. Three options are available. These are to leave the programme alone; to modify its marketing strategy; or to eliminate it.

The first option, to leave it alone, will be implemented if it is considered that there is no better alternative use for the resources currently being allocated to it. To continue offering a programme which serves very few, has to be heavily subsidised, or provides minimum clientele satisfaction is not necessarily a managerial crime. It is reprehensible only when management does not know the extent of its use, subsidy or satisfaction benefits, or, knowing the facts, does not have sound reasons for retaining it.

If a programme is not a success despite evidence suggesting that there is potential demand for it, then the appropriate option may be to modify its marketing strategy. The programme may be revitalised by assigning new leadership to it, adopting a fresh approach, using a different facility, or developing an alternative structure or format. It may be promoted differently to appeal to a different clientele group. The price may be too high, thereby discouraging some users. Alternatively, the price may be too low; for a low price may infer to some potential clientele that the programme is inferior. Adjustment of any of these factors may be all that is required to revitalise the programme. In such cases, elimination is inappropriate.

**Implementation of the Decision**

If the selected option is to eliminate the programme, then it becomes necessary to identify and deal with the effects such as reallocation of resources and communication with the regular clientele serviced by that programme. Programme elimination is really a form of demarketing. The decision to withhold a programme or service previously offered may require an active demarketing effort to persuade the public that the service must be withdrawn for valid economic reasons. It is important to educate the participating clientele as to why a programme is being eliminated in order to minimise loss of goodwill.

Participating clientele should be informed of the elimination intent far enough in advance to permit them to make arrangements to participate in a similar alternate programme if one is available in the community. Ideally, timing of an elimination should tie in with the new programmes coming in to replace old programmes or use the resources previously committed to them. As manpower and facilities are released from the ailing service they should be allocated to the new services. Although this can never be completely achieved, it may be approximated.

**Conclusion**

The process of programme evaluation-elimination, which includes the stages of rising costs, and/or decline in performance and programme reevaluation, offers some support for organised abandonment.

Drucker has suggested that programme evaluation-elimination may be used for programme or one activity beyond the other.

Lack of any such policy may have been a wastage of resources. One look at the production of fewer and fewer goods shows that fewer and fewer goods are necessary and even well designed. The same approach is needed for eliminating programmes and services.

This article has attempted to identify those programmes identified as being ineffective, implementing the decision. Programme evaluation-elimination is a necessary process for community service agencies for better utilising the limited resources of their clientele.

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Conclusion

The process of programme deletion is as important as new programme introduction. The quality of an agency’s overall contribution to its clientele, particularly in periods of rising costs, and/or declining allocations, may be dramatically affected by the care exercised in programme pruning.

Programme elimination is an activity that most administrators seek to avoid. Although weak programmes place a disproportionate burden on agency resources, it is often felt that their popularity will again rise, that their elimination will be too disruptive, or that their elimination will have negative impacts upon important clientele or other interest groups. As Alexander has noted, “putting (programmes) to death—or letting them die—is a drab business, and often engenders much of the sadness of a final parting with old and tried friends.”\(^23\) Nevertheless, the recent emergence of “sunset laws”, which provide for the automatic lapse of public agencies and programmes, offers some evidence to suggest there is both popular and legislative support for organised abandonment of programmes.

Drucker\(^24\) has suggested that public agencies should be required to abandon one programme or one activity before a new one can be started. He reasons that:

Lack of any such policy is probably why new efforts over the last 20 years have produced fewer and fewer results. The new programmes may well have been necessary and even well-planned, but their execution had to be entrusted to whoever was available rather than to the many experienced people stuck (administering) unproductive and obsolete (programmes).

This article has attempted to illustrate the importance of adopting a formal programme evaluation-elimination strategy. A three step procedure was suggested for identifying those programmes which should be considered for elimination, evaluating identified programmes to determine whether or not they should be eliminated, and implementing the decision. This approach should provide useful guidance to community service agencies for better managing their scarce resources and serving the needs of their clientele.

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