

## CASE STUDY

**While the government workplace is different from the private sector, the same tools and decision-making framework can work in both environments.**

**Joe Walsh**, Knoxville's Parks and Recreation Division Director

# MBA students collaborate on parks project

The University of Tennessee College of Business Administration full-time MBA program collaborates annually with local not-for-profit organizations and Tech 2020 startup companies so that MBA students can apply their business knowledge to challenges faced by entrepreneurs. The project is part of the MBA's Innovation and Entrepreneurship curriculum. Students "walk in the footsteps" of these organizations to develop leadership skills from the application of knowledge obtained in the classroom. The business school has two compelling interests—an educational experience for MBA students and outreach to the community.

Six students collaborated for six weeks with the city of Knoxville's Parks and Recreation Division earlier this year. The organization strives to provide clean, safe and secure facilities at an affordable cost for residents and guests to spend leisure time.

**MBA students:** Tyler Gustafson, Samantha Kilgore, Adam Maruskin, Edwin Merrigan, Chris Miller (project manager) and Russell Smith, led by faculty director Glenn Swift.

#### **Client partners:**

Joe Walsh, the division's deputy director; and Harold Denton, manager.

**Opportunity:** To understand and recommend best practices so that Knoxville's residents and visitors have the opportunity to enjoy a quality experience at city-owned recreational facilities.

**Approach:** The team devoted 450 hours to a proven, problem-solving framework of engagement: baseline development, research, benchmarking best practices, conclusions, recommendations and predictable outcomes. The students conducted extensive research examining current operations; interviewing

staff and residents; observing facilities' use; and benchmarking three other similarly situated cities — Lexington, Ky.; Asheville, N.C.; and Chattanooga — to ensure that recreational facilities are well-utilized.



BUSINESS JOURNAL FILES

Mike Glover, left, an instructor for the city of Knoxville's Parks and Recreation Division, leads participants in a water aerobics class at the South Knoxville Community Center.

staff and residents; observing facilities' use; and benchmarking three other similarly situated cities — Lexington, Ky.; Asheville, N.C.; and Chattanooga — to ensure that recreational facilities are well-utilized.

"The short-term nature of this consulting engagement forced my teammates and I to evaluate the essence of 'value-creation' and to rely on trust and personal strengths to accomplish our goals," Kilgore said. "Ultimately, participation would be the prime measure of success."

**Key findings:** The city parks and recreation staff is passionate about its mission and has plenty of ideas to increase usage. The city's facilities are clean and safe.

However, limited resources challenge the staff's ability to effectively share information about offerings throughout the community and residents are not well informed of the available recreational opportunities. The internal decision-making process is somewhat informal. And other cities consistently charge more for their programs.

Walsh said, "The six MBA students working with Knoxville Parks and Recreation did an ex-

ceptional job in quickly identifying a specific course of action that we all agreed should be taken and then moving forward on addressing the issues."

**Results:** Based upon analysis of data gathered and validated, the students made 10 recommendations.

Suggestions to implement over the short-term or immediately include:

- Construct ways for employees to share ideas, what they've learned and concerns. For example, add Internet access to each facility and produce a seasonal newsletter.

- Develop an integrated communications plan for marketing the facilities.

- Implement a "pre-event assessment scorecard" to best allocate resources and choose programs to be offered.

- Implement a post-evaluation process to determine program use and user satisfaction.

- Medium-term (six to 12 months) recommendations:

- Implement partnership programming to help communicate offerings with the community, such as with newspapers and public radio, through media

sponsorships, etc.

- Develop a fee structure for various events that would enable better offerings.

- Provide each center with Internet access, e-mail and a staff computer.

- Evaluate existing facilities for long-term growth.

Over the long-term, the suggestions included:

- Consider facility consolidation; renovation.

- Bring more technology to the communities through computer labs, workout equipment, etc.

**Lessons learned:** While the government workplace is different from the private sector, the same tools and decision-making framework can work in both environments. The students discovered that score-carding and metrics are difficult when dealing with intangible results such as social benefit, and that proper data collection produces much more than research but also fresh ideas and perspective.

For more information on becoming a client company, please contact Glenn Swift at gswift@utk.edu or 865-974-2661.