Chapter 11

Training tomorrow’s aquatic leaders: A collaborative model in the Regional District of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island

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Chapter Summary

The recruitment, training and retention of Lifeguard/Swimming Instructors is essential for the provision of safe and high quality aquatic programs. For years, recruitment, training and retention has become increasingly challenging. The issue was identified in Ontario, Canada, in 2005, and over the past ten years the issue has continued right across the country. The author, who works as an Aquatic Recreation Programmer for the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) on Vancouver Island, BC, has recently been dealing with this mounting problem.

As a solution, the author, in collaboration with the local School District, developed an Aquatic Leadership Program (ALP). A school based curriculum was designed, allowing students to gain credits for aquatic leadership courses offered by the RDN. The ALP was a comprehensive concept approved by the School District and included Ministry of Education funding. A Pilot Project was initiated from February 2015 to June 2015. Eight students were accepted and of the eight students enrolled, six successfully completed the program, and three were hired by the RDN.

Upon evaluating the program with the SD69 teachers involved, the ALP was deemed a success. The goals and objectives of both parties were met, and the outcomes established for the students were also met. However, there were some challenges identified throughout the program and these were addressed during the evaluation process. Solutions to the challenges were explored that will be integrated into the next ALP implementation.

The ALP was beneficial to the RDN because it provided a group of trained and certified students able to apply for employment after completing the program. It was favourable to SD69 as it fit well with its mandate to provide students with alternative educational experiences to enhance their knowledge, skills and experience for future career choices. Most importantly, it was of significant advantage to the students who gained invaluable leadership skills and were well trained to obtain employment while attending school or upon graduation.

Another important benefit of the ALP is its value to other communities facing similar staffing challenges. The author recently completed a Power Point presentation to the Canadian Red Cross. It was well received and there may be other stakeholders interested in hearing about the program including Parks and Recreation Associations and School Districts across Canada or internationally. The ALP can be an excellent solution to recruiting and retaining certified and qualified aquatic staff.
Learning Objectives:

1. Recognize and understand the issues in recreation services that are specific to employing specialized aquatic personnel that include lifeguards, and swimming and aquatic fitness instructors.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of strategic/critical thinking to create solutions to the issue.
3. Explain the importance of finding solutions to the problem and the challenges it creates for rural communities.
4. Dissect the issue in order to create innovative and creative solutions that are key to success.
5. Collaborate with community partners to develop a successful program that benefits all parties involved in the process.

Introduction

This paper focuses on an issue related specifically to employment concerns regarding the recruitment and retention of certified and qualified staff in a pool facility in the Town of Qualicum Beach, BC. The author, an Aquatic Programmer with the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN), began critically thinking about solutions to address the problem and came up with the concept of an Aquatic Leadership Program (ALP) that could be integrated into the School District 69 (SD69) curriculum. This case study will further identify the problem and solution, outline the program in detail and provide examples of the application process and the program/curriculum information.

The Issue, Opportunity or Trend

The recruitment, training and retention of lifeguard/instructors is critical in providing aquatic programs that are safe and of high quality. Communities that provide swimming lessons and public swimming sessions, whether in facility based swimming pools or at waterfront sites such as lakes or oceans, are continually in need of well trained and certified staff. The most important priority of these staff is to ensure the participants are kept safe and protected in potentially dangerous aquatic environments. Over the years, many recreation departments have been finding it more and more challenging to recruit, train and retain staff for these types of services especially in rural and remote areas.

In April 2005, the Leisure Information Network released a Parks and Recreation Trend Watch publication on the topic of Aquatic Staff Shortages. The publication highlighted the problem for the province of Ontario, Canada and suggested the problem had been around for at least 30 years. It also noted, at the 2003 Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) Aquatic Conference, that Aquatic Staff Shortage issues were to be the top priority for the PRO to address in the Aquatic Special Interest Area. In July 2008, a follow up publication was released noting the problem was still a significant concern and highlighted the impact with the following statement, "If an area is experiencing a shortage of qualified deck staff, service delivery may have to modified, reduced or cancelled”. Since that time the problem has been ongoing, presenting current and serious staffing shortages that are difficult to manage, and trending across the country. This issue can have a substantial impact on communities regarding the safety of children, youth and adults, especially rural waterfront communities.

A publication by Swim Life Magazine in the spring 2015 reported on the shortage of qualified lifeguards and instructors as an ongoing issue for the aquatics community both in the public and private sector. The article cited a 2006 study completed by
the City of Saskatoon’s Leisure Services Department that “found young people in Saskatoon may not choose to become lifeguards because of things that interfere with the completion of training” including such factors as “increased work load in school, too expensive to complete the training, the training schedule is too demanding, and trainees are not aware that there is the potential benefit of employment at the end”. The article concluded, “Research to provide insight into potential creative solutions to address issues is vital”.

In November 2014, Global News reported on St. Albert, Alberta, where the city was experiencing a lifeguard shortage and had no choice but to reduce hours. The department was in need of approximately a dozen lifeguards to maintain current operations. In researching the topic further, there were numerous cases on the web from communities like Wood Buffalo, Alberta, and further afield in the United States, such as Marshall Town, Iowa, and even as far as Hawaii. All of these communities were placing notices of operations being reduced due to staffing shortages.

The Ravensong Aquatic Centre (Fig. 1), located in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, on the west coast of Canada has also been experiencing similar concerns. The facility has provided a considerable amount of programs and services, not only to Qualicum Beach, but also in a number of other rural communities within the RDN. The pool operates efficiently with approximately 20-25 part-time and casual lifeguard/instructors. Although the RDN Recreation and Parks Department has been experiencing staffing issues for a number of years, the problem has become much more onerous in the past four to five years. Most recently, due to staffing shortages, the Aquatic Centre has postponed and/or canceled some programs and events, and even altered hours of service.

Previously, a number of initiatives have been utilized by the RDN to recruit aquatic staff. These initiatives have included:

- attending school job fairs,
- scheduling of training to best accommodate students such as on weekends and evenings,
- provincial and national job postings,
- met with school counsellors to communicate opportunities,
- attended classrooms to present career opportunities directly to students,
- broadened financial access opportunities to students,
- reduced costs of leadership programs,
In speaking with colleagues throughout the years, the author has noted similar initiatives have been used by other departments. Most of these initiatives have been met with limited success. Many of these initiatives are still used, but new innovative approaches are always being sought to deal more successfully with the challenge.

In March, 2014 the Aquatic Programmer began strategizing new and fresh ideas as the issue was becoming very problematic. Staff were being overworked when they were asked to cover for other staff who were ill and this became even more problematic as the overworked staff then requested time off for sickness. The nature of the environment in aquatic facilities is one where illnesses are easily passed along through interactions with the public and/or co-workers. As well, many of the positions are casual and staff may not be available to work when needed. Also, lifeguarding can be very transient, often a stepping stone job to other things; therefore, staff may come and go quite regularly. In addition, it is challenging to recruit staff to this location. Being a more rural area, unlike larger cities such as Nanaimo, there is not a pool of University students to readily draw on for job opportunities. A familiar phrase heard over and over again during the past year has been, “we do not have enough staff”.

The Innovation

Case Context

The Aquatic Programmer had been involved with a Mr. Darin Carmichael of SD69, a local teacher who supervises ROAMS (Rivers, Oceans and Mountains School), an outdoor career education and leadership program. Mr. Carmichael had initially contacted the Aquatic Programmer to provide Lifesaving (Bronze Cross and Bronze Medallion) and first aid training to his students. After this encounter the Aquatic Programmer began thinking more critically about a strategy to collaboratively work with the local school district because they had a pool of students who could be target marketed to, and potentially be attracted to lifeguard positions. By integrating a recreation training program in a school based curriculum the Aquatic Programmer could access a pool of trained and certified students who could begin working for the RDN to ensure aquatic based programs would continue to thrive for the betterment of the community as a whole. It would be a credit based, semester program that would be mutually beneficial to both SD69 and the RDN, and even more beneficial to the students. Mr. Carmichael’s supervisor, Mr. Jeff Temple, Principal of CEAP (Collaborative Education Alternative Program) was contacted and a meeting was set up to discuss the concept. Mr. Temple was very excited about the opportunity. The concept was explored further and a plan was developed including courses required, course credits, and a suitable and acceptable curriculum for one semester each year.

Stakeholders Involved

The Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) provides a wide variety of services to seven Electoral Areas and four municipalities including the City of Nanaimo, the District of Lantzville, City of Parksville and the Town of Qualicum Beach. One of the key service functions is the Ravensong Aquatic Centre that provides aquatic based activities, programs and events to the residents mainly in the north end of the District including Parksville, Qualicum Beach and two of the Electoral Areas (G and H) surrounding the city and the town. As these are waterfront communities, the residents served rely heavily on the aquatic centre services offered through the Recreation and Parks Department.
School District 69 includes a large number of schools including eight elementary schools, two high schools and two alternative schools. The majority of the elementary schools utilize the Ravensong Aquatic Centre for grade 3 Red Cross Learn to Swim Lessons. The Ballenas High School in Parksville also utilizes the pool for recreational swimming and the alternative school, CEAP (Collaborative Education Alternative Program), utilizes the pool for swimming and aquatic leaderships programs. CEAP was instrumental in developing the Aquatic Leadership Program with the RDN.

The Canadian Red Cross and the Lifesaving Society, both national organizations, have a vested interest in making swimming areas safe for individuals and families, and reducing the number of deaths due to drowning in Canada. The RDN is a training partner for the Red Cross Water Safety, Learn to Swim and Instructor Development programs, and Lifesaving Society for teaching lifesaving and lifeguarding skills.

Community residents, who support the Ravensong Aquatic Centre through their tax dollars, also rely on the lifeguard/instructor services to ensure a safe environment for themselves and their children while using the facility. Some community residents also benefit directly from these services from a training perspective and possible employment opportunities as lifeguards or swim instructors.

As a significant community asset, the Ravensong Aquatic Centre provides an invaluable service to the residents of the RDN, especially for the four communities through which it is directly funded. Without this service many residents would sense a significant loss.

Approach Used and the Impact

This concept focused on developing young students as aquatic leaders, providing them with opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills and experience, while achieving valuable certifications for future jobs.

Goals and Objectives
The main goal for the RDN was to increase the number of local, well trained and certified individuals who may be eligible candidates for lifeguard positions at Ravensong Aquatic Centre. The main goal of SD69 was to provide students with alternative educational experiences that can enhance their knowledge, skills and experience for future career choices.

Target Market
The program was targeted to high school students both male and female, 16-19 years of age. The National Lifeguard (NL) program requires a minimum age of 16 years while BC Ministry of Education funding is only approved for students under 19 years of age. This was a great opportunity for students to gain some quality training, experience and academic credits while attending school, which can lead to part time work while attending school and/or potentially full time work in the future. In this particular setting, the program targeted two high schools, BSS (Ballenas High School) in Parksville and KSS (Kwalikum Secondary School) in Qualicum Beach.

Key objectives to meet these goals were to:
- develop program content,
- establish a school based curriculum,
- obtain School District approval,
- train and certify students to prepare them for work opportunities,
- provide job shadowing opportunities and
- secure supplemental funding to provide long term opportunities.
Student Recruitment, Application, Supervision and Evaluation processes

The ALP was open to any student interested in applying. However, the ALP has been targeted specifically to the CEAP and ROAMS programs due to the nature of these programs and relationship already established between the RDN and these two program areas.

SD69 established an application process for the students. There were two parts to the application process. The first was a Student Application form to be completed by the student, and signed by the student and a parent/guardian. And the second was a Teacher Statement of Reference that teachers completed once a student has applied. Students were then selected based on the application information and a personal interview. This is critical if there are more than twelve candidates applying. The program has been initially developed with a minimum requirement of six students and a maximum of twelve.

Students were supervised and supported by RDN staff while participating in courses at the Ravensong Aquatic Centre and also by the teacher who facilitates their program and course work. Participation and attendance was mandatory in all courses. Students were reminded that any absences must be approved by the teacher and that absences may result in a failed certification. In each course, there were specific requirements to be met including core competencies in physical, mental and team work skills, which are tested and evaluated by the instructors of each course. The teacher was also involved in the evaluation process, specifically for online course work at the school sites. Once students received the required certifications for lifeguarding and swimming instruction, they were eligible to apply for employment with the RDN.

Marketing and Promotions

Mr. Temple and Mr. Carmichael developed a written curriculum outlining the ALP details. This document was provided to students in the CEAP and ROAMS program. Also, Mr. Carmichael, located at KSS, promoted the programs personally at BSS, and Mr. Temple attended Careers Day to promote the program to other students. These were the key focus areas for marketing/promotions to students at this time, agreed upon by both parties.

Scheduling

The initial plan was to run the program during the Winter/Spring semester (February – June) each year. During school hours, students were required to attend three afternoon sessions (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays) between noon and 3:00 pm at Ravensong Aquatic Centre, where they receive specific aquatic based instruction and training. As part of the commitment to the ALP students must also attend two morning sessions at school, Tuesdays and Thursdays, to complete additional course and program work. The program covers a span of approximately 18 weeks. A complete, detailed schedule is included in the curriculum.

Program Content

The ALP was designed for high school students, providing them with opportunities to obtain required certifications during school hours rather than during weeknights or weekends. This was beneficial to the students as they may gain credits for the courses attended. If students require and complete all four courses they may receive up to 12 graduation credits (an equivalent of 3 graduation, 4 credit courses).

This program was developed to provide students with specific training in four courses to become certified lifeguards. The four courses include: Red Cross Water Safety Instructor course, Red Cross Standard First Aid course, Lifesaving Camp (Bronze
Medallion/Bronze Cross course), and the National Lifeguard course. The courses were taught by certified lifeguard instructor trainers, and include both practical and theory components, taught in either the pool or in a multipurpose room.

If the program were to continue, each year the program would begin with a welcome and introductory session and students would then begin the course work.

Pilot Program

It was important for the School District and the Regional District to engage in a pilot project to get the program off the ground and evaluate its success. The program started in February 2015 and ended in June 2015. Eight students applied for the pilot and were accepted based on their readiness for the program.

The students began working through the program courses, all completing Standard First Aid and Water Safety Instructor (WSI) certification within the first two months with the exception of one student who made up the missed WSI content at a later date. Interestingly, the WSI course was also a pilot program recently initiated by the Canadian Red Cross. The Aquatic Programmer is on the National Red Cross Swimming and Water Safety Instructor Development Program committee. Over the last three years the committee has been developing a blended learning program that includes online, classroom and teaching experience for the WSI Program. Five provinces across Canada were selected to pilot this new program in early 2015. As the ALP was just being implemented, it was regarded as a great fit, so the Parksville/Qualicum Beach area was chosen as the BC pilot. As part of the ALP, students were required to become certified Water Safety Instructors. This certification prepares the students to teach Red Cross swimming lessons. This selected group of students were some of the first to complete this program across the country.

Most of the students were committed to the ALP; however, one student dropped out due to competing academic commitments, and one student failed due to not passing one of the courses.

Program Costs

In developing the program, the following direct costs were established in relation to the four courses as outlined in Table 1 below.

Course fees included the candidate fee as applicable (Lifesaving Society courses), materials and instructor wages. As the National Red Cross piloted the WSI course, the cost of the course packages ($75) were waived. The full amount would need to be applied to future programs. Also, the School District was able to get Ministry funding to support students through the process. The Ministry would only support students who were under 19 years of age. There was limited funding so students still had to pay for some of the costs (up to $600) for the program. Ministry funding must be approved annually so this could be a program concern in the future. This issue would need to be evaluated on an annual basis. After completion of the program each year, the Regional District would invoice the School District for the funding.
Outcomes

The following outcomes were identified for the program. These outcomes incorporated the RDN and SD69 goals, while focusing on student benefits:

- students’ swimming and leadership skills are enhanced,
- students’ will obtain more certifications to add to their resumes,
- students will acquire course credits towards their graduation,
- trained, qualified, certified, students who are deck ready for aquatic job opportunities.

ALP Evaluation Process

The RDN and SD69 developed an evaluation process to identify whether or not the program was effective, the goals and objectives were achieved, the outcomes were met, and based on the challenges and feedback, what may need to change to enhance the program. Key components of the evaluation process include the following:

- feedback forms from students, parent/guardians, and instructors,
- success rate measured by pass/failure ratio of students (deck ready candidates),
- meeting with RDN and SD69 representatives to evaluate the pilot program and consider changes necessary to maintain the success of the program.

Implications and Lessons learned

Once the ALP Pilot Project was completed in June, the evaluation process was initiated to review the outcomes and successes, the challenges, and the future of the program.

The Aquatic Programmer met with the Mr. Temple and Mr. Carmichael in late June 2015. In reviewing the goals and objectives and the outcomes of the ALP, all were achieved through the Pilot Project. SD69 succeeded in its goal of providing students with alternative educational experiences that enhanced their knowledge, skills and experience for future career choices, and the majority of the students attained the benefits outlined in the outcomes including certifications, course credits and potential employment opportunities. The RDN was able to increase the number of local, well trained and certified individuals who may be eligible candidates for lifeguard positions at Ravensong Aquatic Centre. In fact, four of the six students who completed the program applied for positions with the RDN. Three of these students were hired between July and October 2015. This success rate was considered a very satisfying result for the Pilot.
The only objective that could not clearly be perceived as a success was the funding component for the students through the Ministry of Education. Long term funding can only be achieved on an annual basis so until the next ALP is implemented, the question of long term funding will remain unanswered.

The Aquatic Programmer also met with staff to get their feedback. Staff believed this concept was a good initiative to increase the number of trained Lifeguard/Swimming Instructors for future employment. They enjoyed the process for the most part; however, they did agree the scheduling of three hour blocks was challenging.

In speaking with Mr. Carmichael and the Aquatic Team Leader, they noted the majority of students had appreciated the opportunity to do the Pilot Project and were pleased with their successes in the training. However, the students also expressed concerns about the scheduling.

Scheduling was certainly one of the key challenges identified throughout the Pilot Project, but there were also a number of other challenges identified. The following highlights the key challenges addressed at the evaluation meeting:

- **Student schedules** - Most leadership courses are run in 4-8 hour blocks of time; however, students needed to be accommodated within school hours, so there was a program limitation of three-hour blocks provided within the school day schedule. This was a new concept to aquatic staff and they found the courses choppy and somewhat more challenging to teach in the shorter blocks. To resolve this concern, the ALP will run with a minimum of four-hour blocks.

- **Transportation** – Transportation was an issue for students coming from the Ballenas High School in Parksville. Some students did not have their own transportation and found it difficult to get to the Aquatic Centre in Qualicum Beach. Two alternative ideas will be explored including the use of the RDN 15 passenger van with a volunteer driver or meeting with transit to consider changing the bus schedule and route to better accommodate Ballenas High School students.

- **Lack of students’ swimming skills** - The majority of students lacked the swimming expertise required for the WSI course; therefore, more time was needed to improve their skills to bring them to the required standard. The schedule had to be revised; however, in the future a prerequisite of a 100-meter swim will be mandatory, and a Learn to Swim course will be included.

- **Communication** - one of the concerns addressed was the lack of communication between the RDN and SD69 during the Pilot Project. It was agreed that opportunities to meet regularly between RDN and SD69 staff would be beneficial to keep both parties up to date on any successes, issues, challenges and/or changes necessary. Bi-weekly meetings would be considered. Also, due to the online component of the ALP, there were a considerable number of questions from the students. As the students were offsite, communication was challenging. To resolve this issue, a closed Facebook Group page was created by the Aquatic Team Leader for students and instructors, providing more effective communication amongst the group. This initiative was well received by the teachers, instructors and staff.

- **Lack of qualified staff to teach** - Due to the issue of staffing as identified in this paper, it resulted in some staffing problems for running the courses for the students. This was a concern, but the problem was managed successfully and the RDN will continue to do so to the best of its resources.
• **Students’ missing classes** - Students involved in the program were very busy with other competing course requirements, which made it sometimes difficult for them to make choices about what course to prioritize. They were supposed to be committed to this program because of the certification, but other course requirements become priorities and a class or two of the ALP was missed. When this happened it created more challenges in working with the students to complete the program. Once consideration to remedy this problem is to schedule in make up classes so students can more effectively deal with their commitment to the ALP and other academic requirements. Also, the schedule will be presented to the candidates prior to recruitment so they have a realistic awareness of the commitment.

• **Funding** - The cost of the program was considerable for young students. It can create a barrier so this will have to be explored in the future. The main concern is whether or not Ministry funding will continue to be accessible each year. If this funding is not available, it could potentially create further difficulties for students to participate in the program.

With the evaluation complete, plans are now in the works for the next ALP to be implemented in 2016. The ALP may also be modified to suit other similar situations, such as Skate Leaders. The Aquatic Programmer has started discussing strategies with a co-worker, the Arena Programmer, to see how it might assist her in dealing with the same issue. The program could also be valuable for other departments to consider for their facilities, and the Red Cross may have interest in it as well. As previously mentioned, the Aquatic Programmer made a presentation to the Canadian Red Cross. This occurred on March 26, 2015. The presentation was well received, and Red Cross representatives at that time recommended the ALP Power Point be presented at future Ripple Effects Aquatic Workshop. There may also be an opportunity to present the information to the British Columbia Parks and Recreation Association and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, as well as the Lifesaving Society. The program can also be shared easily with other Parks and Recreation Departments across the country and internationally.

Having been involved with aquatics for the past 45 years and the Red Cross Swimming Program for 25 years, the Aquatic Programmer strongly believed this approach would help fill the labour shortage issue and get young people excited about the area of aquatics as a job opportunity or career. The provision of the ALP was definitely considered a win/win situation for all parties involved and if the success of the Pilot Project was any indication of its potential, the future will only serve to enrich its purpose.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What other innovative and/or collaborative solutions to the challenge of recruitment, training and retention of specialized aquatic personnel have been successfully implemented?
2. Are there other key stakeholders in the community that are looking for innovative ways to engage youth in career based learning experiences that could be involved in the process?
3. What alternative methods could be implemented to enhance an Aquatic Leadership Program that may work more effectively for all parties involved, especially with respect to scheduling?
4. How can we more effectively encourage and engage youth in considering lifeguarding and instructing as viable sources of employment?
5. What are the ways in which we can break down the barriers and challenges that hinder youth in participating in these types of training programs?
References


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Anne Porteous currently works for the Regional District of Nanaimo Recreation and Parks Department as an Aquatic Recreation Programmer. She has worked in the field of aquatics for over thirty-five years and during this time she has been professionally and personally involved with the Canadian Red Cross National Swimming and Water Safety Service. For the past five years, Anne has been a member on two national Red Cross Aquatic Committees including the Instructor Development Program and the Water Safety Technical Advisory Group assisting in aquatic program development and water safety training. Her commitment to the Red Cross and her expertise has afforded Anne opportunities to visit China three years consecutively (2010-13) as part of a Canadian delegation to develop a Red Cross Swimming and Water Safety program in two different Provinces. As a Recreation Programmer, Anne has worked with various community organizations over the past fifteen years in the Regional District of Nanaimo to provide quality, aquatic based services. Her most recent project has been the development of an Aquatic Leadership Program, working in collaboration with School District 69 to provide local employment training and opportunities for young people interested in lifeguarding and swimming instruction. Email: APorteous@rdn.bc.ca