



Workforce Development and Career Exploration in Parks and Recreation



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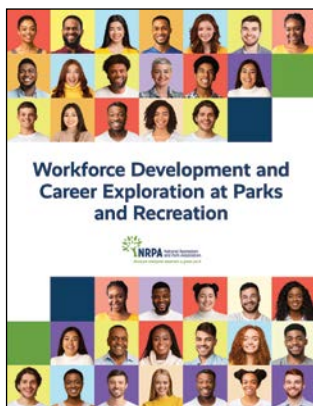
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Workforce development and career exploration programs in parks and recreation can help develop a stronger and more diverse generation of park and recreation leaders.



Cover photos courtesy of Dreamstime. All other photos in this report courtesy of NRPA.

Students attend the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore.



Introduction

Parks and recreation has positive impacts on the lives of millions of people every day. Local park and recreation agencies provide a diverse set of essential amenities and services that include not only valuable infrastructure, such as parks, trails, recreation centers and nature preserves, but also vital services that help meet the challenges facing every city, town and county across our nation.

Cities, towns and counties have encountered an expanded list of challenging and intersecting issues, including the current public health crisis due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, economic recession, climate change and the demand for equity. Each of these challenges has made parks and recreation even more fundamental in daily life — essential to communities for healing, gathering, delivering emergency services and providing tranquil spaces for people seeking a respite.

Parks and recreation's benefits are the result of efforts by hundreds of thousands of professionals and volunteers. Park and recreation professionals are catalysts of community resiliency who champion health and well-being, equity and climate-readiness throughout the United States. To ensure that they meet their communities' evolving needs, desires and pressing challenges in the future, park and recreation agencies must recruit new professionals to join the field. Even more critical, park and recreation agencies need to build a diverse workforce that reflects the communities they serve. This starts by exposing young people to the many professional opportunities that a career in parks and recreation offers.

Workforce development and career exploration programs connect youth and young adults to the possibilities of a park and recreation career. These programs take many forms ranging



Park and recreation professionals take part in a group activity during a 2017 NRPA Innovation Lab in Austin, Texas.

from entry-level jobs or internships to specialized skilled-based training programs. Workforce development and career exploration programs can expose youth and young adults to a wide variety of occupations within the field such as recreation programming, natural resource management, planning, operations and public safety. Youth and young adults participating in such programs gain valuable work experience, build self-confidence, develop foundational skills and learn how rewarding a park and recreation career can be.

Workforce development and career exploration programs are critical contributors to the future success of parks and recre-

ation. In December 2020, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Research team surveyed park and recreation leaders to gain a better understanding of the current state of workforce development and career exploration programs at park and recreation agencies. The 13-question survey asked about workforce development and career exploration programs, focusing on the nature of these programs, agency partners and the challenges of recruiting and cultivating a diverse workforce. The survey's 321 responses from park and recreation leaders across the United States are the basis of this report.



Park and recreation professionals and advocates attend an education session at the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore.

Workforce Development and Career Exploration in Parks and Recreation: KEY FINDINGS

1 in 3 survey respondents indicates that their park and recreation agency currently offers a workforce development and/or career exploration program.



Developing future park and recreation leaders is the top goal of workforce development and/or career exploration programs.



Nearly 9 in 10 agencies collaborate with partners on their workforce development and/or career exploration programs.



Partners provide vital support in recruiting, training and connecting participants to jobs.



Key Findings

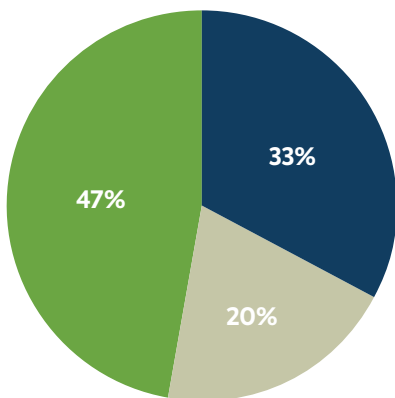
One in three survey respondents indicates that their park and recreation agency currently offers a workforce development and/or career exploration program targeted to teenagers, young adults and other people entering the labor force for the first time. Agencies located in urban locales are significantly more likely than those in other areas to have a workforce development and/or career exploration program in place. Fifty-six percent of park and recreation leaders from urban park and recreation agencies report that they currently offer a workforce development program, compared to 36 percent of respondents from suburban agencies and 24 percent of those from rural agencies.

Park and recreation professionals indicate that these programs are likely to become more common over the next few years. One in five park and recreation leaders is looking to establish workforce development and/or career exploration programs at their agencies within the next two years, with nearly identical percentages of respondents from urban, suburban and rural agencies indicating that they will do so.

Nonetheless, opportunities to expand these programs even further remain. Slightly less than half of all park and recreation agencies — 47 percent — do not currently have a workforce development program in place, nor do these agencies plan on establishing one in the near future. One in five urban park and recreation agencies does not anticipate establishing such a program within the next two years. The percentage rises to 39 percent at suburban agencies and 52 percent at rural agencies.



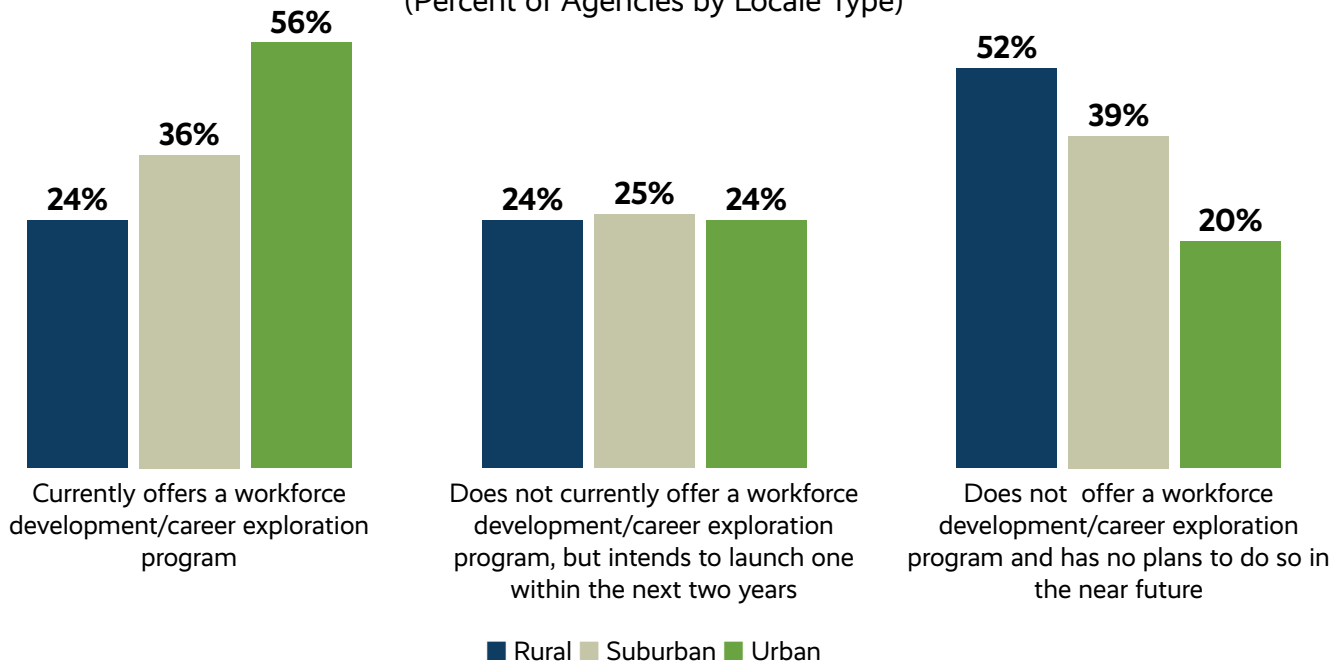
More Than Half of Park and Recreation Agencies Currently Have or Intend to Establish a Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program (Percentage Distribution of Agencies)



- Currently offers a workforce development/career exploration program
- Does not currently offer a workforce development/career exploration program, but intends to launch one within the next two years
- Does not offer a workforce development/career exploration program and has no plans to do so in the near future

Workforce Development and Career Exploration Programs Are Offered More Frequently by Urban Park and Recreation Agencies

(Percent of Agencies by Locale Type)



Structure and Goals of Workforce Development and Career Exploration Programs

Workforce development and career exploration programs can expose youth and young adults to a wealth of career possibilities within the field of parks and recreation. A sizable percentage of park and recreation agencies with workforce development and career exploration programs have offerings that cover:

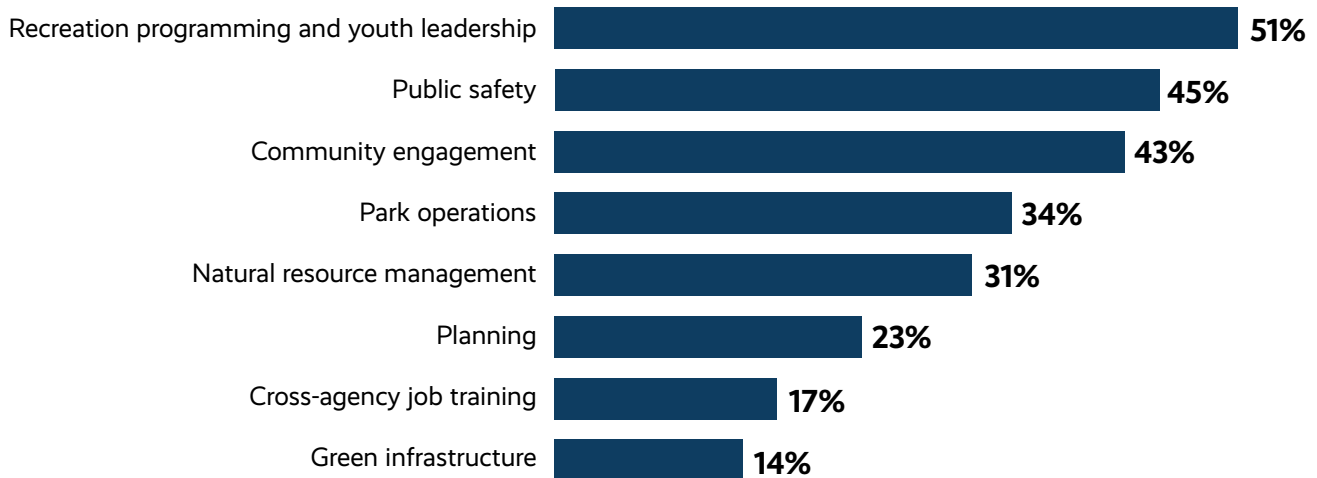
- Recreation programming and youth leadership (51 percent)
- Public safety, including lifeguards and park rangers (45 percent)
- Community engagement (43 percent)

Other common career opportunities presented in workforce development and career exploration programs include:

- Park operations, including marketing, administration and finance (34 percent)
- Natural resource management (31 percent)
- Planning (23 percent)
- Cross-agency job training, including those supporting parks, policy, health departments and public safety (17 percent)
- Green infrastructure (14 percent)



Park and Recreation Agencies Expose Youth and Young Adults to a Wide Range of Jobs (Percent of Agencies That Currently Offer a Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program)



Park and recreation leaders view workforce development and career exploration programs as critical opportunities that demonstrate to youth and young adults that parks and recreation is a rewarding career path for them to pursue. Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicate that developing future professionals and leaders is a key goal of their agencies' workforce development and career exploration programs. Respondents from suburban agencies (66 percent) are more likely to identify developing future professionals and leaders as a critical goal of workforce development and career exploration programs than are those from urban (55 percent) and rural (55 percent) agencies.

Employment at park and recreation agencies is often the first job for many youth and young adults, providing not only a chance to earn money, but also a place where they can build self-confidence and gain valuable work experience. Slightly less than half of park and recreation leaders indicates that providing youth with employment opportunities is a crucial goal of their agencies' workforce development and career exploration programs. Urban (65 percent) and rural (64 percent) agencies are more likely than suburban agencies (42 percent) to conduct these programs with the explicit goal of providing jobs for young people.

Fair and just access to high-quality parks and green spaces, recreation facilities, youth sports and programs promotes healthy, resilient and economically vibrant communities. Having a staff that reflects the communities they serve is critical to ensuring that agency services, programming and amenities meet the public's needs and desires. Forty-two percent of park and recreation leaders — including 65 percent of respondents

from urban agencies — indicate that a critical goal of their agencies' workforce development and career exploration programs is to recruit a more diverse agency staff.

These programs also can help prepare youth and young adults for their future regardless of whether they continue to work in parks and recreation. For example, park and recreation leaders report that these programs include as fundamental goals:

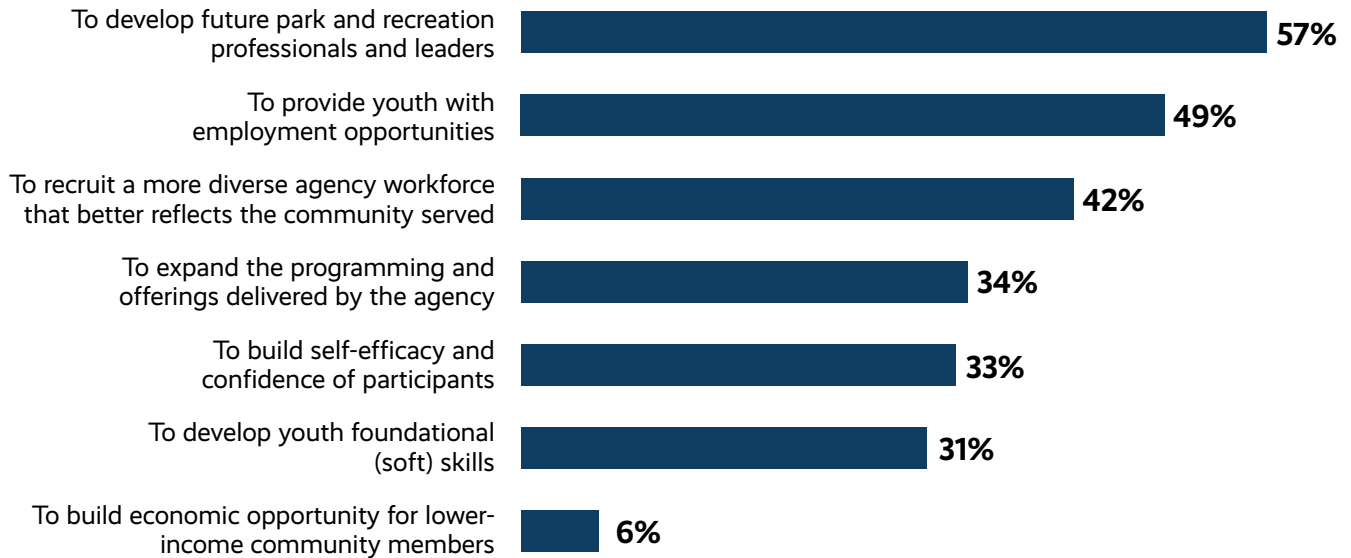
- Building self-efficacy and confidence of program participants (cited by 33 percent of respondents)
- Developing youth foundational skills, including communications and financial literacy (31 percent)



A panelist speaks to a group of park and recreation professionals during the 2017 NRPA Innovation Lab in Austin, Texas.

Key Goals of Workforce Development and Career Exploration Programs Are Developing Future Park and Recreation Leaders, Providing Youth Employment and Recruiting a Diverse Staff

(Percent of Agencies That Currently Offer a Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program)

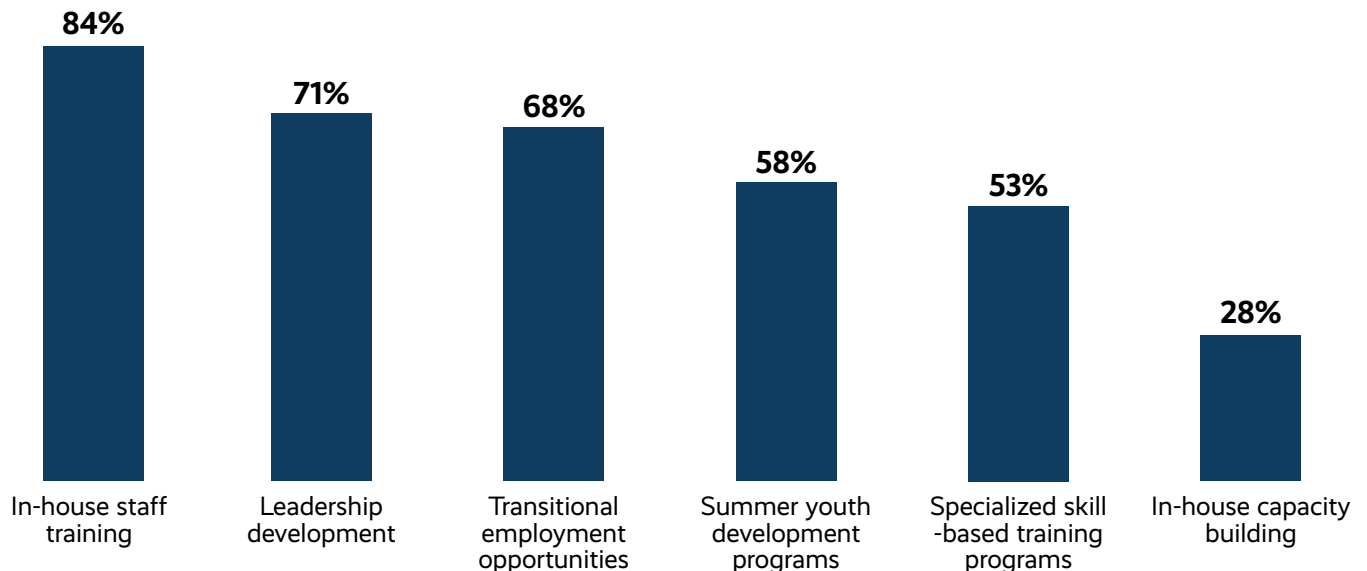


Park and recreation workforce development programs take many forms. Some programs focus on developing current agency staff, while others aim to bring new people in to consider parks and recreation as a career. The most common workforce development and career exploration programs are:

- In-house staff training (84 percent)
- Leadership development (71 percent)
- Transitional employment opportunities, such as entry-level jobs and internships (68 percent)
- Summer youth development programs (58 percent)
- Specialized skill-based training programs, such as first aid, public safety, horticulture and green infrastructure (53 percent)

In-House Staff Training Is the Workforce Development Program Most Frequently Offered by Park and Recreation Agencies

(Percent of Agencies That Currently Offer a Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program)



Partnerships

Partnerships are vital components of most park and recreation agencies' workforce development and career exploration programs, whether it is to recruit participants, connect them to jobs or develop training and mentoring resources. Eighty-eight percent of park and recreation agencies partner with one or more organizations to implement their workforce development and career development programs.

Park and recreation agencies are most likely to partner with nonprofit organizations in their workforce development and career exploration programs. Three in five park and recreation agencies have at least one nonprofit organization — such as the youth-focused nonprofits, [The Corps Network](#) and [Youth-Build](#) — as partners in these programs. Park and recreation agencies also collaborate with local community groups (43 percent) and faith-based organizations (14 percent) on workforce development and career exploration programs.

Local government departments are other common partners for workforce development and career exploration programs. Fifty-eight percent of agencies work with the local school system, while 55 percent partner with a non-school, local government department. Non-school, local government departments are more common partners for urban agencies (77 percent) than

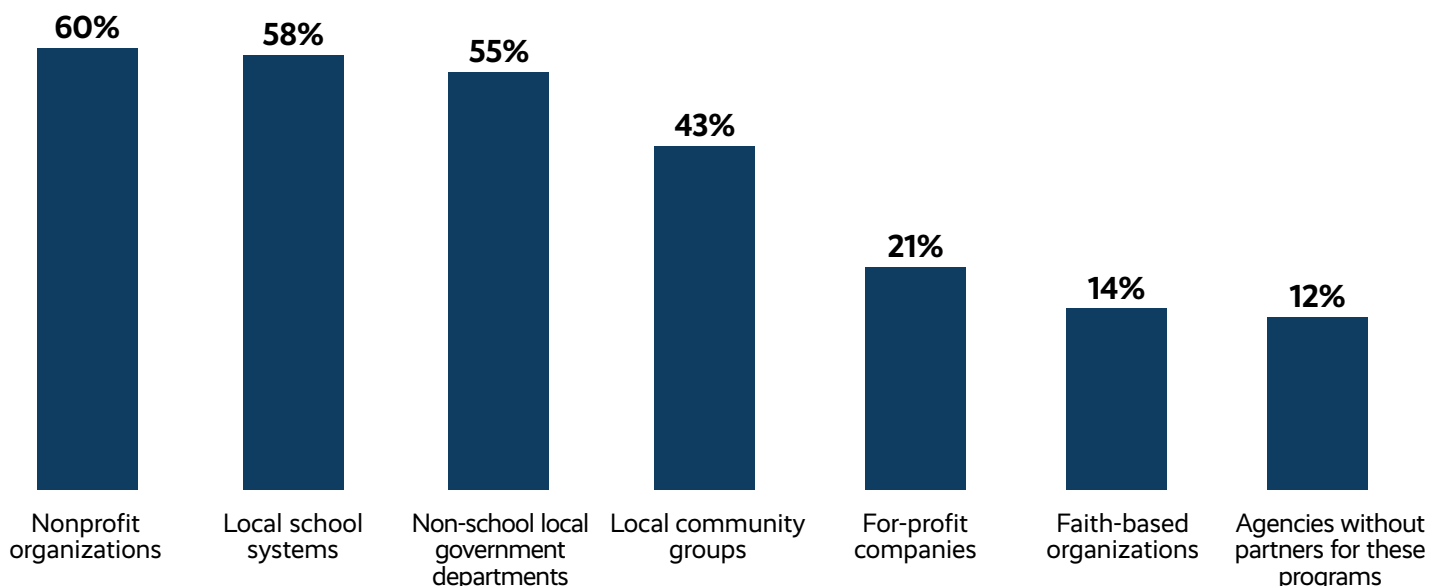
for suburban (49 percent) or rural (36 percent) agencies. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of rural park and recreation agencies partners with their local school system (90 percent), which is well above the percentage of urban (53 percent) and suburban (54 percent) agencies that do so.



Attendees of the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore chat with each other during an education session.

Nearly Nine in Ten Park and Recreation Agencies Collaborate With Partners to Support Their Workforce Development and Career Exploration Programs

(Percent of Agencies That Currently Offer a Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program)



Partners are critical collaborators for recruiting program participants and providing job opportunities. Sixty-three percent of agencies work with their partners to recruit and assist in selecting youth and young adult participants in their workforce development and career exploration programs. Three in five agencies collaborate with their partners to help connect participants to jobs while the partners of three in 10 agencies directly provide jobs.

Partnerships also assist in the development of training and mentoring resources. Sixty percent of survey respondents indicate their partners play a critical role in providing training resources. At a third of park and recreation agencies, partners provide mentoring services that supplement those provided by agency staff.

Partnerships also provide essential financial and logistic support for these programs, including:

- Marketing the program and raising awareness of the program to the public (47 percent)
- Providing financial support (31 percent)
- Providing logistic support (19 percent)
- Supporting fundraising activities (15 percent)



Park professionals take part in an educational session during a 2017 NRPA Innovation Lab in Austin, Texas.

Partners Provide Vital Support in Recruiting, Training and Connecting Participants to Jobs (Percent of Agencies That Partner in Their Workforce Development/Career Exploration Program)



Challenges Impeding Greater Impact and Success

Most park and recreation agencies face challenges that hamper their efforts in cultivating a diverse workforce prepared for current and future challenges in the community. The most pressing issue facing these programs is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has strained park and recreation agency budgets due to funding declines and rising expenses that reduced or eliminated jobs for youth and young adults. Also, closed facilities, decreased programming and physical distancing requirements have sharply shrunk or eliminated opportunities for in-person connections between program participants and agency staff.

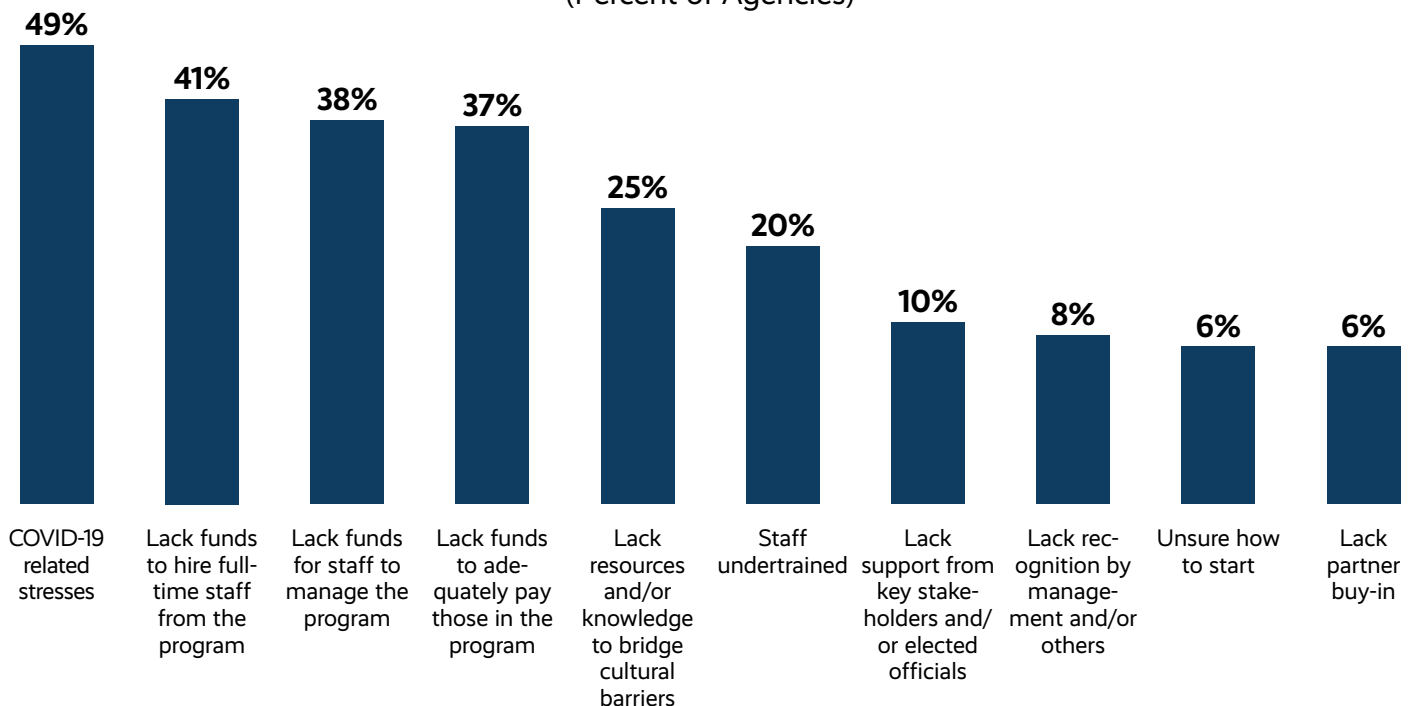
Beyond the pandemic, agencies face additional factors — including a lack of resources — that hamper their goal of fostering a diverse workforce through workforce development and career exploration programs. Top resource-related challenges include a lack of funding:

- To hire full-time staff from the development program (41 percent)
- To hire staff to manage the program (38 percent)
- To adequately pay youth in their workforce development programs (37 percent)

A quarter of park and recreation leaders also reports that their agencies lack the resources and/or knowledge to bridge cultural barriers with diverse groups. At the same time, 20 percent indicate that their staff lacks the necessary training.



The Pandemic and Scarce Funding Are the Top Challenges Park and Recreation Agencies Face in Cultivating a Diverse Workforce
(Percent of Agencies)





Young professionals attend an event at the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore.

Conclusions

Workforce development and career exploration programs play a vital role in connecting youth and young adults to the possibilities of a park and recreation career. These programs help build self-confidence and provide valuable work experience for thousands of people each year, while exposing them to a world of career opportunities in parks and recreation. Slightly more than half of park and recreation agencies currently have launched a workforce development and career exploration program or intend to do so within the next two years.

Park and recreation leaders recognize the value that workforce development and career exploration programs have in attracting new, diverse talent to their ranks. As current park and recreation professionals retire and the needs, desires and challenges of the community continue to evolve, the need to attract the next generation of workers will expand further.

The question is how to nurture and expand workforce development and career exploration programs in more agencies across the nation.

As it has with nearly all other facets of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on workforce development and career exploration programs, sharply reducing the opportunities for youth and young adults to interact with current park and recreation professionals. But even before the pandemic and resulting economic recession, many park and recreation agencies encountered funding and resource constraints that prevented these programs from reaching their potential. Through sustainable funding, the development and nurturing of partnerships and greater training and mentoring will ensure that workforce development and career exploration programs lead to an innovative and equitable future for parks and recreation.

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