



NATIONAL
RECREATION AND PARK
ASSOCIATION

CAREER PATHWAYS THROUGH YOUTH MENTORING





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Resource Goals

This resource is designed to help park and recreation professionals and other youth mentoring service providers integrate career exploration activities into their mentoring programs. This resource:

- Summarizes the importance of career exploration for youth via youth mentoring programs in parks and recreation
- Outlines key considerations that park and recreation professionals should keep in mind as they integrate career exploration into mentoring programs
- Explores career exploration strategies that can be integrated into mentoring programs in parks and recreation
- Identifies common challenges and solutions to integrating career exploration activities in your mentoring programs

Introduction

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe parks and recreation is vital to community health and well-being. Local park and recreation agencies serve as **Community Wellness Hubs** — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life. In this role, park and recreation agencies provide vital programs and services that address youths' diverse health and wellness needs where they live, learn, work and play, including exploring career pathways and workforce opportunities.

Park and recreation professionals serve millions of youth across the nation each year and are leading providers of youth development services — including mentoring, youth sports, afterschool and summer programs, workforce development, environmental education, arts and cultural offerings, and other enrichment activities. According to the **2021 Out-of-School Time Survey Report**, more than 4 in 5 park and recreation agencies offer out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth and include programming beyond traditional physical activity and recreational opportunities. Many agencies deliver programming to support young people's social-emotional and life-skills development so they can better manage the challenges that come with growing up, and they support youth in the following areas¹:



¹National Recreation and Park Association. (2021). 2021 Out-of-School Time Survey Report. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/out-of-school-time-survey-results/>



Career Pathways Through Mentoring

Transitioning from school to career can be both an exciting experience and an overwhelming one for young people. Providing career exploration and workforce development services can help prepare and support young people with the transition. One way to accomplish this is by supporting youth as they explore and develop career pathways.

A career pathway is a series of structured and connected programs, activities and support services to help youth transition from school to career. Career pathways will look different for young people. Some youth may be interested in trades that require a specific skill set and training (e.g., electrician) and want to join the workforce immediately, while some might be interested in a career in the military or as a first responder (e.g., firefighter), and some might be interested in enrolling in post-secondary education (e.g., college). As the world continues to change, more career pathways will emerge that young people will want to pursue.

There are limited opportunities for youth to engage in career-exploration activities on their own. As a leading provider of youth development services, including mentoring programs, parks and recreation is uniquely situated to support youth as they explore their interests and build career pathways, including into the park and recreation field.

Why Are Career Pathways Important?

Integrating a career-pathways approach into youth mentoring programs provides awareness, exploration and preparatory experiences that enable youth to explore career pathways. This approach builds awareness and allows youth to learn about themselves, their education and career options, and workforce expectations. Youth mentoring programs focusing on career pathways enable youth to explore which options (e.g., education, career) are a good fit for them while preparing youth to solve problems, communicate effectively, work with diverse teams, develop career goals and create follow-through plans.

As outlined by the National Mentoring Resource Center, mentoring is important to consider in relation to supporting career interests and exploration in youth for several reasons²:

- Mentoring relationships may provide young people with access to a trusted, caring adult who is dedicated to understanding and cultivating the young person's interests and helps them achieve their goals.
- Mentors serve as role models. A mentor can share their personal experiences, including challenges and successes, regarding their career decisions and path.
- Mentors can serve as advocates for mentees. A mentor can connect their mentee to unique opportunities to explore their career interests or connect their mentee to other trusted adults or professionals who can help support the mentee's career interests and exploration goals.

²National Mentoring Resource Center. (2021). Mentoring for Enhancing Career Interests and Exploration. Retrieved from <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/resource/mentoring-for-enhancing-career-interests-and-exploration/>

Effective Strategies to Incorporate Career Pathways Into Your Youth Mentoring Program

Initially, it may seem a bit challenging to successfully integrate a career-pathways approach into your youth mentoring program. However, by following key steps, you will be able to put this guidance into practice. Below are six strategies that park and recreation professionals can implement to promote career interest and exploration within their youth mentoring programs.

1. Create a well-thought-out mentor recruitment plan.

To incorporate career interest and exploration into a youth mentoring program, you must be intentional about mentor recruitment. Consider creating a detailed mentor recruitment plan that will help you identify individuals willing to serve as both a role model and advocate for a young person in their community.

A mentor recruitment plan should include:

- **Goals and Desired Outcomes:** What are you trying to achieve through your program? What types of mentors will best help you accomplish these goals? How many mentors?
- **Recruitment Timeline:** Consider what your desired program start date is. Based on this date, when do you want to complete mentor recruitment?
- **Recruitment Strategies:** Where will you look for mentors? What local organizations or businesses can you partner with to recruit reliable mentors? Who will be responsible for mentor recruitment?
- **Marketing Strategies:** How will you conduct outreach? What promotional materials will you need to create? Will you use word of mouth, social media or flyers? Will you attend events to promote your program? Regardless of the method, be sure your pitch and materials are clear and informative to ensure the goals of your program are reflected.
- **Mentor Roles and Responsibilities:** Create a detailed description of a mentor's role in the program. Be sure to include time commitment, requirements and expectations. As you conduct outreach, this key messaging should be made available in all promotions. This will ensure there are no surprises when your program starts.
- **Mentor Training Outline:** Influential mentor/mentee relationships start with high-quality mentor training. NRPA's [Mentor Training Resource](#) provides park and recreation professionals, who are implementing youth mentoring programs, with the tools and skills necessary to successfully train staff and community members to serve as mentors.³

A detailed mentor recruitment plan with the above elements will pave the way for effective mentor/mentee matching. When you recruit mentors with intent, you provide more opportunities to welcome mentors bringing a wealth of career experiences, backgrounds and connections.⁴

³National Recreation and Park Association. (2022). Mentor Training Resource. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/mentor-training-resource-2022.pdf>

⁴MENTOR. (2022). Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/mentor-training-resource-2022.pdf>

2. Partner with local businesses and organizations.

Consider teaming up with local businesses, community-based organizations or other municipal partners to incorporate work- and skill-based learning opportunities into your mentoring program. Strategic partnerships with local organizations can create vast opportunities to connect mentees with trusted professionals from various career pathways. Local businesses and organizations can provide opportunities for job shadowing, internships, workplace tours and informational sessions, which can all assist mentees as they work to connect the dots between their education and the professional world.

Hands-on work experience not only gives youth the opportunity to envision themselves in different career paths, but also helps youth develop valuable soft skills (e.g., communication, time management, problem solving, teamwork), which are appealing to both admissions committees and hiring managers.



The development of soft skills among youth should be prioritized as a key outcome in any career-pathways initiative. According to Youth Power's [Soft Skills for Positive Youth Development](#), "the term 'soft skills' refers to a broad set of skills, behaviors and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals." These essential skills will help young people succeed in life, regardless of the educational or professional path they choose to take. When planning events for youth, be sure to implement engaging activities that encourage participants to explore and strengthen their soft skills, which can range from communication to conflict resolution.

In addition to providing hands-on experience to mentees, consider looking to local partners for mentors and guest speakers who can help empower mentees to make decisions about their academic and professional pursuits. This is an excellent way to equip youth with the confidence, information and skills needed to explore their passions beyond completion of the mentoring program.



Bonus: These partnerships are not only beneficial to mentees, but they also positively impact the local businesses involved! Offering these learning opportunities to youth helps businesses increase recruitment of new, young professionals, AND gives existing employees the chance to grow professionally and personally by serving as a mentor.

When identifying partners to collaborate with, be sure to consider the unique interests and professional goals of each mentee. It is beneficial to expose youth to as many career paths as possible to ensure they are given the opportunity to pursue any and all professional options, maintenance, marketing, city planning, among many others.

And in doing so, be sure to highlight the park and recreation field. This way, you are encouraging career exploration among youth and recognizing the park and recreation field as a viable career pathway.

Consider the following activities to engage youth with the park and recreation career path:

- ✓ Allow young people to shadow your department for a day.
- ✓ Invite young people to apply for an internship within your department.
- ✓ Start a youth leadership council that works with park and recreation staff to plan events and make decisions.
- ✓ Encourage park and recreation staff members to serve as mentors in your program.
- ✓ Create entry-level job openings for new professionals.
- ✓ Launch a campaign that highlights the many different careers within parks and recreation, including maintenance, marketing, city planning, among many others.



Mentor and youth share a celebratory fist bump at an afterschool program. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

3. Engage students from local universities.

As young people begin to explore different career paths, it is beneficial to highlight educational paths that may lead to their careers of interest. What better way to do this than to allow mentees to connect directly with students in higher education?

Consider collaborating with your local university or college to engage students pursuing higher education as mentors or guest speakers in your program. Not only can these students share more about what different career pathways look like in learning environments, but also they can share more about their experiences with higher education in general.

Invite students from different areas of study to engage with your program to cover the unique interests and goals of each mentee in your program. Provide these students with the opportunity to share more about their professional goals and their day-to-day activities that support these goals, including classes, internships or extracurricular activities they take part in. This relationship connects mentees with a trusted role model who can answer questions, share advice and provide support as mentees explore academic and professional options for the future.

4. Host career-focused mentoring activities.

During your regularly scheduled mentoring meetings, consider hosting activities that encourage career exploration. This is a great way to connect mentees — especially those who may lack role models or encouragement outside of your program — to the resources that can help them expand their confidence and potential.

When planning career-focused mentoring events, remember intentionality is key. It is important to be intentional about the time of year these events are held. For example, if you are approaching summer, consider hosting a workshop on interviewing for youth who are looking to participate in summer jobs or internships. To go even further, consider inviting guest speakers and professionals from different career paths to participate in a job or internship fair. This provides a great opportunity for youth to learn about different routes of employment and ask questions, network and explore job openings.

It is also beneficial to consider the age of your mentees when planning and hosting career-focused events. If your mentees are primarily high school juniors or seniors, consider incorporating activities that focus on the next steps post graduation. This can include workshops focused on résumé building, interviewing skills, professionalism or even the application process for higher education or professional opportunities. Feel free to survey your participants to gain a better understanding of the areas where they feel additional support is needed.



When planning career-focused mentoring activities, try to provide participants with tangible takeaways to encourage further exploration after the scheduled sessions. For example, if your organization decides to host a résumé-building workshop for mentees, ensure each participant has the opportunity to leave with a drafted résumé or consider providing participants with templates that can be used to draft a successful résumé outside of sessions.



Mentor assists youths with homework assignment. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

5. Keep youth engaged academically.

Look for additional opportunities to encourage your mentees to commit to their academics. Mentors serve as a great resource for academic support and can assist mentees with schoolwork during regular mentoring sessions. By dedicating time to schoolwork during mentoring sessions, you are encouraging mentees to complete their work and providing them with the support they may need to do so. A mentoring program provides an excellent platform to offer tutoring sessions, study groups and even academic showcases where youth can present their learnings from school to mentors, staff, or parents and caregivers.

A mentor is also a great tool in assisting youth as they strive to find meaning in their studies. In many cases, young people may not understand the purpose of completing their schoolwork and, for this reason, may be less motivated to do so. To resolve this, encourage your mentors to engage in goal-setting activities with their mentees, which can help build a connection between a mentee's studies and the real world. When youth start to establish purpose in their academics and engage more deeply with their coursework, they are more likely to pursue and achieve their personal goals.



Mentor and youths explore nature through a magnifying glass. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

6. Amplify youth voice.

In any youth mentoring program, centering youth voice is essential for fostering a positive, inclusive environment. To do so, we must shift our focus from talking to young people to listening to young people instead. When integrating a career-pathways approach into your youth mentoring program, consider ways in which you can amplify the voices of your mentees.

Invite mentees to plan mentoring activities that align with their career interests and goals. Presenting youth with opportunities to lead is a great way to ensure your programming is reflective of the needs and wants of your mentees, and it provides young people with the opportunity to develop the soft skills that all individuals need to be successful in the workforce. Additionally, offer young people the chance to participate in programming and decision-making procedures. By cultivating space for youth in our mentoring programs and planning processes, we are helping to establish a sense of belonging and importance in young people and providing them with confirmation that their opinions and thoughts are valued.

Activities that encourage career exploration should be planned and implemented with youth at the center. When we amplify youth voices, we are equipping young people with the confidence needed to become active collaborators and leaders in a community. Early on, we must teach young people to elevate their voices so that they can serve as a catalyst for positive change in the future — both personally and professionally.



Peer Strategies

Examples From the Field

Case Study: G.R.A.N.I.T.E. (Grow. Resource. Achieve. Nurture. Inspire. Teach. Empower.) Youth Mentorship Program: Mount Airy Parks and Recreation Mount Airy, North Carolina

Mount Airy Parks and Recreation implements the G.R.A.N.I.T.E. Youth Mentorship Program with a mission to foster positive relationships between public school students and adult mentors. Participating mentors seek to support families and promote future leaders to be academically and socially successful.



A group of youths participate in afterschool activities together. Photo courtesy of Mount Airy (North Carolina) Parks and Recreation.



Through the **G.R.A.N.I.T.E.** Youth Mentorship Program, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation strives to create a mentoring environment that encourages career interest and exploration (CIE) among youth in their community. To support this goal, Mount Airy integrates career-focused activities into their mentorship program through a variety of activities:

- **Job shadowing** involves arranging opportunities for mentees to shadow professionals in their fields of interest. By observing mentors at work, mentees have the chance to network, ask questions, and explore the roles and responsibilities aligned with specific careers.
- **Mock interviews** are integrated into the mentoring sessions to support mentees as they prepare for academic or professional interviews. After these mock interviews, mentees receive direct feedback to help improve their interviewing skills.
- **Career panels** involve inviting professionals from various industries to serve on a panel and share their experiences, challenges, and successes with mentees. During the discussion, mentees have the opportunity to ask questions and learn about various career paths.
 - **TIP:** To maximize engagement, gauge the career interests and goals of your mentees when selecting professionals to serve on a panel. This will ensure the discussion is relevant and beneficial for mentees in the audience.
- Mount Airy coordinates **industry tours** which are visits to local businesses, industries and job sites. During these tours, mentees have the opportunity to observe how different industries operate while learning about available career options.
- **Campus tours** are organized for mentees to visit local colleges and universities, allowing them to familiarize themselves with an academic environment. These guided tours, led by mentors and university staff, ensure that mentees receive adequate insight into academic programs, campus life and services available to students.

Conclusion

Park and recreation professionals continue to play an important role in guiding youth as they explore their identities in the professional world, especially through youth mentoring programs. A meaningful mentoring relationship that incorporates opportunities for career exploration can equip young people with the skills, experiences and connections needed to successfully transition from academics to the professional world. By integrating career pathways into youth mentoring programs, park and recreation agencies everywhere can contribute to increased motivation, confidence and purpose among youth — all of which are critical when setting and exceeding personal and professional expectations and goals.



Mentor assists youth working on a tablet during an afterschool program. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

Additional Career Pathways Resources to Explore

- **NRPA's *Workforce Development: A Resource Guide for Parks and Recreation*:** This resource guide provides an overview of what intentional workforce development looks like, and it is meant to help you engage external partners to help create your own workforce development efforts. It highlights innovative workforce programs that advance economic and workforce equity opportunities for their communities while highlighting career opportunities in the field of parks and recreation.
- **NRPA's *Workforce Development: Self-Guided Workbook for Parks and Recreation*:** As part of NRPA's commitment to supporting innovative ways to engage and prepare the future workforce, this self-guided workbook provides a place for reflection and growth along with guidance on how to develop or renovate a workforce development program. This workbook can be used by an individual, a team or community members.
- ***Career Readiness Resources for Youth Serving Programs*:** A webinar series hosted by MENTOR and American Student Assistance (ASA) that highlights career readiness resources for initiatives serving young people.



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About the National Recreation and Park Association

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. For more information, visit nrpa.org. For digital access to NRPA's flagship publication, Parks & Recreation, visit parksandrecreation.org.

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