

TRANSITIONING PROFESSIONAL CURRICULA TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING: BRIDGING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

The field of community recreation and youth development often attracts individuals with degrees in related fields (e.g., kinesiology, child development, education) or those with no post-secondary education but substantial experience. While qualified for entry-level positions, these individuals require additional training to develop the competencies needed for career advancement. Adapting a professional recreation education curriculum into a workforce development training series is key to aligning educational offerings with industry needs. This shift transforms traditional academic programs into flexible, skills-based training that caters to a diverse, non-traditional workforce. The transition involves several key steps: focusing on applied skills, incorporating industry-specific tools, and aligning outcomes with professional certifications and job opportunities. The training must also be modular, allowing for different learning styles and experience levels, and fostering greater inclusivity. Instructional methods emphasize hands-on learning, problem-solving, and situational applications, using both in-person and online formats to maximize reach. Ongoing evaluation is vital to the success of the transition. Feedback from employers, trainees, and instructors helps refine and improve the training program. Success is measured not only by completion rates but also by post-training employment outcomes, retention, and career advancement. Ultimately, this transition bridges the gap between education and employment, equipping individuals with the practical skills necessary for success in the modern workforce. By focusing on tangible skills, certifications, and career pathways, this workforce development training offers a responsive, scalable solution to workforce needs, promoting economic mobility and professional growth.

Keywords: *Workforce development, professional curriculum, skills-based training.*

1. Introduction

The field of community recreation and youth development is integral to fostering healthy and engaged communities. A community recreation department, operated by a public entity such as a city or county government, provides sports, arts, culture, and other recreational activities designed to enrich the lives of its residents. Full-time employees in these programs commonly fall into two categories, the first is those with college degrees in recreation or a related degree. Related degrees include areas like education, child development, and kinesiology. The second category is those with little or no formal post-secondary education. These individuals begin in part-time positions, and over time their experience creates opportunities for full-time employment. While either path is adequate for entry-level positions, individuals without a degree in recreation may face challenges in advancing their careers due to gaps in specialized training and competencies. The need for additional development becomes especially pronounced as the demand for skilled professionals grows in this field. Thus, transforming traditional academic programs into workforce development training series offers a practical solution for aligning educational offerings with industry needs.

The conversation concerning the need for workforce development in community recreation is taking place across the United States. Recognizing the critical contributions workforce development programs make to the future success of the field, the National Recreation and Park Association conducted a survey to better understand the current state of workforce development programs (NRPA, 2020). Results indicate one in three respondents have an existing workforce development program and one in five are working to establish a program. Agencies in urban areas were more likely to have a program currently in place but interest in developing programs was consistent across urban, suburban, and rural agencies. Several program structures exist but the most common workforce development 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)

2. Design

Fresno California is located in the middle of the state of California with a population of 545,716 (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Fresno's recreation services are provided by the Parks, After School, Recreation and Community Services (PARCS) Department. The main function of PARCS is to offer the public access to green space to enjoy leisure and recreation. PARCS (2025) maintains the City's 1,500 acres of open space and the team is devoted to providing organized recreation programs and activities for the community.

In 2024, the PARCS Department began a conversation with the Department of Recreation Administration at Fresno State to determine a structure to develop and implement a workforce development program for its employees. Partnerships are a common element of workforce development (NRPA, 2020); however, it is not common to see a partnership with a local university. Literature on workforce development, however, supports the idea that a critical component of workforce development is the transformation of traditional academic programs into flexible, skills-based training (Chau, Bana, Bouvier, & Frank, 2023). Academic curricula tend to focus on theoretical knowledge, which is important, however, it can lack the practical skills required for success in the workforce. This transition involves rethinking the educational approach to emphasize applied skills, situational problem-solving, and the use of industry-specific tools.

A shift from theoretical-based programs to practical, job-focused training can better prepare individuals for the rapidly evolving demands of the recreation and youth development sectors. For instance, training programs that incorporate hands-on learning experiences, such as workshops and real-world scenarios, equip trainees with the tools necessary to succeed in their day-to-day roles. This shift should focus on enhancing specific competencies, including leadership, communication, and programming skills. Furthermore, aligning educational outcomes with professional certifications is critical, as these credentials can open doors for greater job opportunities and career advancement.

In the initial conversations between the PARCS Department and the University, the PARCS department identified several priorities, including 1) Current full-time employees, 12-month intermediate-level training; 2) Current part-time employees, 12-month beginning level training; and 3) Summer youth employment, 3-month intensive beginning-level training. Understanding that the training should be specific to needs and abilities, and based on current needs, the initial focus was on a year-long training for current full-time employees. With the intention of developing training for the other groups over time, the partnership recognized that by offering a variety of training options, they can cater to different learning styles and experience levels, ensuring that the program is inclusive and accessible to a broader range of individuals.

Agency structure dictated a 12-month format so the training schedule was developed to fit into this structure. Content, instructional methods, and delivery formats were key considerations. Four broad categories of competencies were identified for this group (See Table 1). The categories were then operationalized by identifying courses where those competencies were addressed and identifying key learning outcomes in each area. Faculty with expertise in each subject area were recruited to create and deliver interactive, skills-based training.

Conforming to agency practices, the training was designed to occur in person once a month for four hours. In-person learning provides the benefit of direct interaction and hands-on practice. These immersive experiences help trainees gain confidence and proficiency in handling real-world situations. Additional materials are provided online through a learning management system and can be completed asynchronously by the trainees. This allows flexibility, allowing trainees to progress at their own pace, and proves the opportunity for trainees to meaningfully engage in the content. This blended learning approach, having both in-person and online learning, helps to address a diversity of learning styles and provides the opportunity for trainees to revisit materials as needed.

3. Evaluation

The success of workforce development programs depends on their ability to evolve and adapt in response to the needs of both the participants and the employers. As such, ongoing evaluation is essential to ensure that the training remains relevant and effective. Feedback from employers, trainees, and instructors can provide invaluable insights into areas where the program may be lacking or where improvements can be made. Due to administrative delays, this program has not yet gotten underway,

however, a key element in its planning has been a determination of how the training is to be evaluated. PARCS and the trainees themselves will provide feedback on the alignment of skills needed in the workplace with the competencies taught. Instructors will identify challenges in format and structure and will be able to suggest ways to enhance the training experience. Collectively, this feedback creates a cycle of continuous improvement, ensuring that the program remains up-to-date with industry trends and workforce demands.

Perhaps key to the determination of success is the tracking of post-training employment outcomes, such as job placement rates, job retention, and career progression, to determine whether the program is leading to tangible improvements in participants' professional lives. By monitoring these indicators, trainers can refine their curricula and instructional approaches to better serve the workforce and adapt to changes in the field.

4. Conclusion

Workforce development in recreation is essential for addressing the evolving needs of the industry and ensuring that individuals are equipped with the practical skills and competencies necessary for career advancement. This is especially important in a field that is increasingly becoming professionalized, as employers seek employees possessing both the technical skills and the interpersonal competencies needed to excel in their roles. By adapting traditional educational models into flexible, skills-based training programs, this shift fosters a more inclusive, responsive, and accessible workforce. Through hands-on learning, modular training, and ongoing evaluation, workforce development programs can help bridge the gap between education and employment, promoting career growth, economic mobility, and professional success in the community recreation and youth development sectors. As such, these programs represent a crucial step toward building a more capable, skilled, and sustainable workforce for the future.

Table 1. Themes and Workshop Topics Workforce Development Training.

Professional Development Theme	Month	Workshop Topics
Fundamentals	January	Foundations and Careers in Recreation
	February	Diversity and Inclusive Practices
	March	Municipal Government
Programs & Operations	April	Recreation and Parks Facilities
	May	Programming in Recreation
	June	Special Event Planning
Comm Relations & Special Demographics	July	Community and Non-Profit Recreation Ser
	August	Recreation and Older Adults:
	September	Programming for Youth At-Risk -
Leadership & Professionalism	October	Leadership
	November	Research and Evaluation

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