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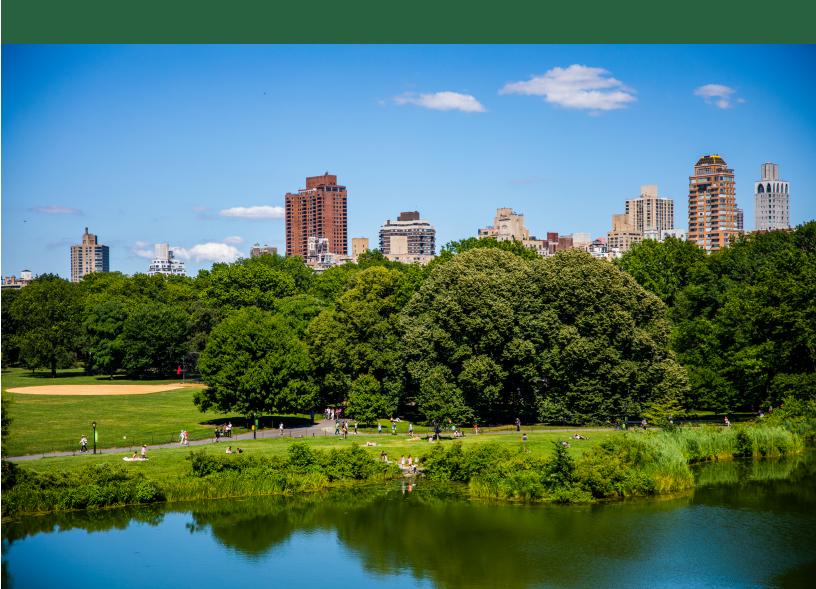
SHARED SOLUTIONS FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN URBAN PARKS

Shared Solutions for Workforce Development in Urban Parks

Winter Urban Park Roundtable 2022

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Introduction

Coming out of the COVID-19 crisis, urban park groups are confronting a host of the same workforce development issues making headlines in other sectors: a tight labor market; difficulties in attracting and retaining talent year-round; and reduced institutional capacity to scale up and promote green jobs, with which parks work has long aligned. The reinvigorated public opinion around greenspaces only amplified these issues. As a result, sharing common solutions and approaches is now a top priority in order for urban park groups to navigate this continuously unpredictable landscape.

About the Urban Park Roundtable

The Urban Park Roundtable, held every spring, fall, and winter, convenes park professionals from around the country to collectively develop "next practices" in urban park management.

Workforce development was the central theme of the Winter Urban Park Roundtable, held virtually on February 24, 2022. The five-hour session was divided into two blocks: The early-afternoon session included introductory remarks from Institute members, a panel featuring staff from Landforce (Pittsburgh) and the Central Park Conservancy, and breakout room exercises; the late-afternoon session included a Q&A with the Woodlawn Conservancy (New York City), breakout room exercises, and concluding remarks.

What We Heard

A pre-event survey found notable successes and obstacles with workforce development amongst participants. Many park groups reported progress in setting aside sufficient resources for workforce development programs; fostering a strong culture of learning and career advancement; and leveraging local partnerships for more diverse recruitment. But several groups also suggested that their lack of an HR department, or an inability to tap into one, and deficient pipelines from other entities—universities, city agencies, local nonprofits, corporations, or unions—in the cities in which the groups are located, leads to an inability to widen their applicant pool, or "skill up" their employees for subsequent employment.

Key Themes

The following three themes arose in the day's discussions:

1.FOCUSING ON "TALENT PIPELINE" CREATION (RECRUITMENT)

ISSUE: While urban park groups said they strove to attract and retain more diverse talent, many reported difficulties fostering "talent pipelines"—clear runways to career or job placement—with local organizations, such as schools and nonprofits, or difficulties knowing where to recruit from. Specifically with youth, participants reported limitations around garnering funding and overseeing internships.

SHARED SOLUTIONS:

While, as one participant noted, there is "no science" to creating relationships with local schools or universities (i.e. community colleges), a few actionable suggestions arose:

- **Offer continuing education credits**. This can be an effective lure for high schools and colleges in establishing more permanent partnerships;

- **Pitch parks as classrooms**. Educators must recognize that space is readily available for environmental programming or other activities, which can ultimately benefit the park;

- **Build lasting relationships with nearby educational institutions.** Cold-calling doesn't work; instead, a long-term interaction yields better results.

Better leverage human resources (HR) to connect with local organizations. HR departments typically have a strong understanding of applicants' necessary skills, which supports managers in preparing new employees for later success. Therefore, park groups should leverage HR departments to seek out and solidify partnerships with local organizations based on institutional knowledge.

Build a workforce lifecycle into funding or partnership pitches. When considering partnerships, craft a package around work experience, showcasing the career skills and paths available to applicants beyond parks.

Partner with local nonprofits that focus on a specific demographic. These partnerships (i.e., with the formerly incarcerated or houseless, veterans, or youth) help to ensure the organization is better connected locally and community driven. Local partnerships also play a key role in mutually benefiting organizations. However, participants did report "growing pains" in terms of aligning training standards and re-educating managers on how to better interview candidates. A "give and take" is necessary to make them work.

Advocate for citywide or governmental support for park jobs. Ask city agencies or representatives for integrated approaches to green jobs promotion (i.e., Cultural Corps, a City University of New York, or CUNY, program that offers students paid opportunities at arts and cultural organizations).

2.CREATING A CULTURE OF CARE (CAREER ADVANCEMENT)

ISSUE: Within their own organizations, staff reported confusion about their level of responsibility for mitigating turnover and advancing training. Downstream, this lack of clarity can produce serious negative effects on external hiring and turnover, as well as internal productivity. This prevents all employees in an organization from reaching their true potential. "Individual success equals team success," pointed out one participant.

SHARED SOLUTIONS:

Create a handbook that defines roles, policies, and guidelines. Shared organizational language that is understood by staff members, new and experienced, helps to align disparate teams and establish legitimacy, while encouraging a streamlined approach to how issues are handled. If supported by strong management and training, this can help establish an inclusive and caring culture beginning with the interview and onboarding process, helping new recruits adjust to a specific organization's culture.

Host values-based or role-playing activities along themes of equity and trust. Notable examples included regular ride-alongs with staff members in various roles; contests for recognition of personal growth (i.e. Landforce's Golden Shovel Award for an exemplary employee); and peer-to-peer support based around lived experiences, to highlight BIPOC and other diversity-driven perspectives. In order to create an inclusive and success-forward environment, employees need to be able to speak out about their own experiences while also acknowledging the different experiences of others.

Encourage partnerships and dialogue between managers and human resources departments. Professional support from HR can help managers feel more supported when handling new hires and navigating workplace challenges, empowering managers to know what they can and cannot say in specific scenarios. A good working relationship can help form a safety net for managers to fall back on when things get complicated.

Allow for long-term mentoring opportunities. Ongoing conversations around questions such as, "How can I help achieve your goals?" and "What is it like to work here?" should drive more durable relationships between more experienced and newer employees. Rather than one-off training events, more regular interactions create safe, welcoming spaces for more advanced learning and career guidance. Managers should be supported and encouraged to engage in these kinds of conversations in an ongoing capacity. This allows urban parks groups to build trust by fostering open interaction between administration and operations, an integral step in future relationship-building.

Encourage accountability up and down the organization. While interaction between administrators and operational crews allows for a stronger feedback loop, organizations should also seek to project transparency and fairness in its dealings, by promoting issues like pay and gender equity, DEAI strategies, and values exercises. It also bolsters resiliency by preparing teams for change.

Reframe expectations or definitions of success. Do the same for failure. Success isn't defined by an employee being in the same role for 30 years; employers should view some turnover as positive. Producing high-performing individuals with heightened potential for professional mobility—employees that leave with improved skills and aim for higher positions—is an important goal to set. Likewise, failure

is a tough yet critical part of workforce development. Incorporating a "fail fast" mentality into hiring and training regiments creates space for a more honest dialogue between employees and managers and opens the door to piloting new organizational practices.

3. CASTING A WIDER NET OF EMPLOYMENT (JOB PLACEMENT)

ISSUE: For organizations with a job placement focus, groups struggle with successfully placing individuals in new jobs after leaving the organization. Typically, this is connected to the strength of local partnerships or interaction with the larger employment landscape and can ultimately affect a group's external appeal and funding.

SHARED SOLUTIONS:

Ensure employers hold similar values as your own. When considering employment opportunities or partnerships, finding organizations within a city or local talent ecosystem that are "the right fit"—with relatable work environments and positive reputations—helps to prepare training regiments and future applicants.

Leverage human resources departments to connect with local employers. As with recruitment, HR departments have the institutional knowledge necessary to identify critical applicant skills. In this capacity, they can spearhead interactions with other organizations with adjacent interests. If a park group doesn't have access to an HR department, targeting fundraising goals to enlist such help can yield immense benefits in connecting talent to local groups.

Find agency points of contact to align jobs and training. Urban park groups should make sure that their talent is specifically prepared for entry- or mid-level jobs at respective city-run parks departments or related entities.

Make job listings easy to find and attractive to various audiences. Ask yourself, "What outcomes are we proud of?" Learning what notable strengths each position has—and subsequently "leaning into" them—can help in promoting it to a more diverse audience, like adult learners or green job seekers.

What We Learned

A post-event survey captured widespread support for further conversations around workforce development. Topics of interest included incorporating racial equity in hiring; creating leaders in the workforce and providing leadership skills for underrepresented communities; and retooling management practices for a post-pandemic job market. There were also a number of suggestions for future roundtables, such as: sustainable practices for park nonprofits; operations in a hybrid environment; and institutionalizing equity in environmental organizations.

Conclusion

As cities bounce back from the COVID-19 crisis, it is evident that workforce development is critical at urban park groups nationwide along three key themes: recruitment, career advancement, and job placement. The Winter Urban Parks Roundtable found that focusing on "talent pipeline" creation; creating a "culture of care"; and casting a wider net for employment can help address these main areas of concern.

One participant described this endeavor as "not a science, but an art." In that vein, these goals are not achieved overnight but require a significant amount of time and investment to fully understand a group's current system and networks, its key gaps, and what can then be done to further grow an organization's capacity to fill them. Like the world of parks itself, workforce development is a work in progress.

Looking Ahead

The Spring Urban Park Roundtable in St. Louis (May 12-13) brought together diverse perspectives to better understand the role of equity in park development as well as the role of urban parks in equitable economic development. A summative report, similar to this one, will be issued to all past and present Roundtable participants over the summer. Our partner organizations include Gateway Arch Park Foundation, Forest Park Forever, Tower Grove Park, and Great Rivers Greenway.

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks, founded in 2013, draws on the Conservancy's history and expertise as a leader in the field of urban park management and public-private park partnerships to empower, inform, connect, and celebrate the individuals and organizations that care for urban parks so that all urban park organizations have the knowledge, leadership, connections, and capacity to create, maintain, and support great public spaces.