

2025 VAAEC Workshops

Career & Professional Development:

Beyond the Basics: An Exploration into Customer Service – Ben Crowley

Everyone knows the basics when it comes to customer service; "smile", "the customer is always right!" This discussion dives a bit deeper into when the customer IS NOT always right and it's getting harder to paste on that smile. Conversations about how to navigate difficult situations and how some can be avoided all together. Let's talk about what it means to truly deliver top notch service just by being observant.

Urban River Guide – David Harding & Justin Black

Urban River Guide is a 27 minute film that follows a group of trainees through a Spring Guide Training in Richmond, Virginia on the James River. Participants will gain perspective on professional development timeline for entering into the service industry.

Marketing the Outdoors – Aidan Rauh

Creating a culture of bought in clients/ students for consistency in numbers coming on trips. Marketing plan catered to the outdoors (School programs, or guide companies. Discussing different avenues to attract clients or students.

Park Like a Ranger – Margo Roseum & Corrina Wendel

Are you interested in conservation, the outdoors, or protecting wild spaces? Indoor or outdoor, the federal government world of the National Park Service and Forest Service could be the place for you! Learn about opportunities for getting involved with the NP and FS in this workshop with staff from Shenandoah National Park and the George Washington Jefferson National Forest. This career development workshop will cover ranger jobs, navigating federal applications, and starting your career with volunteer or internship opportunities. Want a foot in the door with a Park Service or Forest Service Career? Come network, learn and ask questions.

Financial, Personal, and Professional Assessment of Field Work Vs In-Town Work – Sam Albert

Are you considering working as a field instructor, outdoor retailer, summer camp staff, local guide, or something similar? If so, come to this session to discuss each job's financial, personal, and professional pros and cons to help you decide which type of position is best for you.

Outdoor Programs in Scouting America – Bob Young

Are you interested in working with Scouts? Join Bob Young as he goes over the following:

1. An overview of Scouting America
2. Structure
3. Virginia Scouting America Councils
4. Career Opportunities
5. Ways to prepare for a career with Scouting America
6. Working with youth
7. Become a Merit Badge Counselor
8. Review of Scouting America outdoor/adventure Merit Badges
9. Virginia Scouting America Summer Camps
10. Five major high adventure bases of Scouting America.
11. College courses that will help you prepare
12. Other useful skills

Outdoor Entrepreneurship: Building and Organizing Your Outdoor Business – Nick Hurff & Kelli Weaver

Have you ever wanted to own your own business? Join Nick Hurff, Race Director for Rev3Endurance and owner of Apex Sports Performance, for a step by step guide on how to build, market, and design your outdoor recreation business. From inspiration and idea building, to growth and development, this session will cover:

- A. Planning: feasibility, concepts, permitting, insurance, and liability
- B. Event Management: event design, logistics, risk management, and team management
- C. Marketing: branding, funding, sponsorships, and partnerships
- D. Impact: the importance of leadership and reflection in each phase

Inclusion

Wild and Welcoming: How Adventure WV is Using Social Context to Keep Conversations on Diversity Wonderful – Maddie Swecker

DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) can be a complex and challenging topic, often leading to conflict during outdoor expeditions. Adventure WV has been integrating DEI-related curriculum in its First-Year Trips for years. However, recent societal shifts—such as evolving perspectives on race, gender, and identity—have made original curriculum less effective. In this presentation, we will explore these societal changes and how a new curriculum, grounded in the concept of social location, has been implemented. This shift has fostered more meaningful and productive discussions on DEI, offering valuable lessons for creating inclusive and supportive outdoor experiences.

Disability Inclusion Training (DIT) Lite – Katie McLernan & George Florence

Beyond Boundaries: Disability Inclusion Training (DIT) is an interactive and engaging program designed to equip organizations, businesses, partner groups, and volunteers with the skills and knowledge to effectively interact and support individuals with disabilities. This comprehensive course focuses on understanding the diverse range of disabilities, their unique challenges, and the importance of intent and inclusivity. Through a combination of hands-on activities, games, and facilitated discussions, students will gain a deeper appreciation for the needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities. By the end of the program, students will be empowered to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone, regardless of ability.

The Avenues To Advocacy – Xavier Duckett

The Art of Hustle: Pathways to Advocacy Through Mentorship and Outdoor Recreation

By the end of this workshop, participants will:

Education:

- Understand how outdoor recreation can be implemented into mentoring programs and organizations to teach environmental awareness and foster a sense of belonging in nature, intentionally for at risk youth.
- Identify key educational opportunities for introducing youth to career paths in environmental science, outdoor recreation, and leadership.

Empowerment:

- Explore ways to empower youth to develop leadership skills by engaging them in meaningful, hands-on activities in outdoor settings.
- Learn how to build confidence and resilience in youth through experiential learning opportunities.

Exposure:

Recognize the importance of exposing youth to possibilities beyond their immediate surroundings to cultivate a “small city, big dreams” mindset.

Discover strategies for breaking down barriers to equity and access in outdoor spaces, ensuring all youth feel they belong.

Leading with an Equity Lens to Shift Outdoor Participation & More – Tamika Graham

National data indicates the long-standing challenges of the outdoor experience and barriers to participation across diverse populations. This session is for anyone who desires to be an effective outdoor champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion in their community or organization, is looking for new ways to spark change toward a more equitable outdoor future, or wants to learn about the value of community building through the lens of a local hiking affinity group.

Environmental Education, Stewardship, & Sustainability

Building Durable Environmental Stewardship and Leadership into Camp Culture...without Cutting Out the Fun! – Kevin Johnson

Appalachian Headwaters revived an 80 year old coal camp property in Southern West Virginia as Camp Waldo, an overnight camp serving regional youth with an environmental mission. Camp Waldo stands for Water-Air-Land-Diversity-Organisms! For the past 6 years, Camp Waldo has experimented with nurturing environmental self-discovery, stewardship and leadership within a diverse, fun camp experience the broader community buys into. Participants will learn some of the key takeaways from this journey, explore a framework for baking environmental ideas into camp culture, and develop their own ideas for building durable environment stewardship into their programs.

Biospeleology- The Study of Cave Biology – Alexandria Shellhammer

Biospeleology is the study of organisms that inhabit caves and other subterranean environments. Virginia's limestone-rich karst regions host unique cave ecosystems where life has adapted to darkness, limited food, and high humidity. This presentation will explore the fascinating diversity of cave fauna in Virginia and highlight the importance of conserving these fragile habitats. Educators and conservation leaders will gain practical ideas for integrating cave ecology into educational programs, outdoor activities, and conservation initiatives.

Community Initiatives Promoting Coalitions and Collaborations Among Outdoor and Conservation Groups – Susan Tschirhart

The value of community initiatives promoting coalitions among outdoor and conservation focused groups and interdepartmental/organization collaborations as demonstrated through two real-life examples: first: efforts of community members that support long distance hikers to complete the criteria required to obtain the designation of an Appalachian Trail Community under the program developed by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the long-term positive impact that has had on partnerships among local government, local small businesses and the local AT Community Committee.

Second, how a town environmental project “gone wrong” provided the catalyst for the formation of a coalition of eight local conservation organizations that effectively halted an ill-designed project while providing both town and county officials with the expertise and information to re-design the scope and impact of the project; and provided an opportunity to shape how future environmental projects are planned and implemented.

Programming/ Other

Why am I Here? The Importance of Framing your Experience – Mason Gatch

Delivered a teambuilding/problem-solving exercise. Used debriefing questions after the activity. The answers were underwhelming and surface level. Why?

This experiential session is designed to help attendees understand the connection between framing/clarifying the purpose of an experience/activity and the ultimate outcome/behavior that they see in groups that they are leading. Leave with a better understanding of why it is important to take time to frame the purpose of an activity/experience, so your participant group is not wondering: why am I here, or why are we doing this? Attendees will be lead through several short activities, and engage in dialogue related to framing their experience with their groups. Attendees are encouraged to bring activity ideas to pass along and swap with others.

Debriefing: Changing an Ordeal into an Experience – Rhys Franck

What do our participants walkaway with after the program? We deal in experiences, and those are shaped by any number of factors, from intrinsic motivations, to marketing and cultural expectations, to what the weather happens to be that day. How do we help contextualize what we are providing, what happened, and how are we helping our participants and clients walk away with an experience that is valuable to them? I plan to explore client motivations and influences, how we present ourselves and our values, and how we package all of those together with their experience to make an impactful and meaningful debrief. To include open discussions and small group practice.

Break the Case – Jady Sposto & Lane Snow

Break the Case” is an low physical activity including small groups that utilize critical thinking, teambuilding skills, and provided clues to solve a given scenario. The equipment used in this experience is a unique education tool called the “Breakout EDU” box which contains kit-based games similar to a portable escape room within a single briefcase.

Breaking the Ice: An Interactive Workshop for Facilitators and Trip Leaders – Sasha Griffith

Join me to add to your 'bag of tricks.' Whether you lead trips, meetings, or challenge course programming, you will be able to leave with multiple ideas of how to get a group get up and going. This session will focus on participating in games, deinhbitizers, and ice breakers. We will briefly discuss modifications or variations to games to fit different groups. This workshop will cover a variety of ice breakers and short games to wake a group up or get them to laugh at a frustrating time so they can move forward.

Risk Management

Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry – Lester Zook

News accounts of disasters in the outdoors tend to characterize these events as accidents, unpredictable and capricious "acts of God," or results of a harsh and mysterious environment. Honest outdoors people, however, have been realizing for quite some time that most disasters have a human component -- hurry, lack of preparation, bravado, etc. This workshop will explore various human attitudes and decisions that have led to real catastrophes. If we better understand the factors that humans contribute to these events, both our clients and ourselves, we can become wiser and safer leaders of happy experiences in the backcountry.

Stop the Bleed: Life-Saving Skills for Outdoor Adventures – Stephanie Lareau & Carver Haines

When adventure takes you off the beaten path, being prepared for the unexpected can save lives. The course will ensure you are prepared for even the most challenging situations. Through hands-on training, and simulated scenarios, you'll gain the confidence and proficiency to handle bleeding emergencies in the wilderness. Learn life-saving techniques like tourniquet application, wound packing, and pressure control, so you can lead with confidence and keep your group safe on every journey. Don't just guide—be the one who makes a difference when it matters most.

Risky Business - Recreating Responsibly with a PSAR ranger in Shenandoah National Park – Sarah Alice Coleman

Park Rangers from Shenandoah National Park will speak about how the park handles emergencies in the backcountry, from broken legs and cardiac emergencies to missing persons and technical rope rescues. Participants will get a hands-on introduction to the litter system used to carry out injured patients and get a tour of other supplies rangers use on backcountry rescues. Rangers will discuss opportunities to build skills, work or volunteer in the field of SAR in Shenandoah National Park.

Technical Skills

So You Want to Go on a Thru Hike: How to Plan to Hike Your Hike – Nick Wilson & Jared Causby

For the thru-hiking curious or those interested long-distance backpacking. This session will help equip prospective thru-hikers with the information needed to demystify the planning and preparation process, and translate their program backpacking skills to solo, long distance backpacking. Topics covered will include transportation and food logistics, budgeting and money saving strategies, and gear and personal preparation, with time for questions and a discussion at the end.

If you want to live the life of adventure, you gotta know your knots.... – Robert Clemmer

Want to live the life of adventure? You gotta know your knots. Robert Clemmer with Scouting America will share some of his adventures, the importance of knowing knots, and will get you started with the basics to get you going!

River Rescue Knife Use – Karl Schmidt

Learn the essentials of river rescue knife application for swiftwater rescue emergencies. Identify potential entanglement hazards on the river and review mitigation strategies. We will review river knife anatomy and essential characteristics. Everyone will have the opportunity to practice the steps for safe knife use while cutting rope/equipment. This is a hands-on presentation. No previous river rescue experience required.

Introduction to Vertical Caving Technique – Casey Tucker, Harriet Flynn & Kara Grosbach

On rope! Join folks from the Charlottesville Grotto to learn about single rope techniques (SRT) and vertical systems used in caving. During this workshop, participants will learn about the required gear needed in vertical caving and how to use it. Put on seat harnesses and set up a vertical system for the underground environment. Get on rope and climb using mechanical hand ascenders and chest ascenders. Grotto members will guide the process of ascending while also sharing information about caves, caving, cave conservation, and what's happening in the Charlottesville Grotto.

Kayak Roll Clinic Coaching – Karl Schmidt

Learn the essentials of coaching kayaking roll clinics. This is a great workshop for paddling instructors, trip leaders, and recreational paddlers. Learn how the fundamentals of paddling apply to the steps of the roll. Participate in real time to watch how the instructor structures the learning progression and positions themselves throughout the lesson. No previous paddling experience required. 20 in-water participants maximum. No limit on spectators alongside the pool. Half the group will be in boats, half the group will practice being "instructor", then rotate roles. Participants should bring swimwear and an athletic fitting shirt for the water. Towel and change of clothes for after. Boat, skirt, paddle, pfd provided. Sizes not guaranteed.

Orienteering in Adventure Education: Building Skills for Map Navigation and Teamwork – Barbara Bryant

Orienteering is a physically active experience that develops map navigation skills. While orienteering is traditionally done in the forest or wilderness, in collaboration with school teachers

in Massachusetts, Navigation Games has created orienteering-based curricula that can be used anywhere, for all ages. In this workshop, you will navigate outdoors in teams, reflect on your experience, and learn a progression of activities that build map navigation skills. You will also walk away with activity plans and resources, including information about grants to get orienteering maps made.

***Swiftwater Rescue* – Land Based Skills Development – David Harding**

We will cover a series of Swiftwater Rescue Topics with interactive hands on practice. Skills will be applicable to even the novice paddler and a good refresher for experienced paddlers.

***Base-Managed Belay Takeovers* – Lester Zook**

This is a helpful skill for instructors in group (camp, school, club) rock climbing situations. You are leading a base-managed top-roping afternoon for a Scout troop, and one of your belayers gets stung by a wasp. How are you going to sub them out of their position while appropriately protecting the climber who is dangling on their rope above? Come and find out, and bring your harness, cordalette, and belay device if you are able.