

2026 VAAEC Workshop Descriptions

Career & Professional Development:

Your Adventure Starts Here: Launching a Career in Parks & Recreation - Luca Twohie

Finding your place in parks, recreation, and outdoor education doesn't have to feel like getting lost on the trail. This session helps students explore the many career paths in the field while learning how to turn passion, experience, and interests into a clear career direction. Participants will discover common entry points, learn how seasonal jobs, internships, industry associations, and certifications build momentum, and gain practical tips for standing out in the hiring process. Through real-world examples and approachable career advice, this session also introduces personal and professional branding -- how to tell your story, showcase your skills, and present yourself with confidence on resumes, in interviews, and online. Students will leave with clarity, confidence, and concrete next steps to launch their careers in parks and recreation.

Entrepreneurship 101-Lester Zook, Casey Tucker & Harriet Flynn

Are you interested in learning from the stories of startups in the adventure industry? This session will feature founders of 3 different startup efforts (2 businesses and one non-profit) here in the Shenandoah Valley. The time will include stories of formation, mistakes along the way, lessons learned, and lots of time for interaction and questions.

From Field to Policy: A Career Pathway to Advocacy and Policy Management - Mikaela Ruiz-Ramon

This workshop explores a real-world career journey from outdoor experience to advocacy and policy leadership. Using her own professional pathway as a case study, Presenters will guide participants through how values rooted in outdoor education, community engagement, and environmental stewardship can translate into impactful work in advocacy and policy management.

Environmental Education, Stewardship, & Sustainability:

Regenerative Recreation: How recreation can build both soil & souls in a regenerative fashion that restores and improves both human and environmental health - Lee Wittekind

We will dive into some of the latest research and findings on conservation, agriculture, and recreation and how they relate to one another. You will learn how to advocate the importance of conservation, regenerative recreation, and principles/practices associated with them. And we will explore different and unique ways that individuals and/or organizations can implement regenerative practices in their various contexts.

Building a Network of Support for Place-based Education – Chris Freeman & Dianna McDowell

As a small non-profit supporting a small staff at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, we created field trip opportunities with outdoor education that lead to the distribution of more America the Beautiful parks passes to 4th graders than any other group in the nation. We also, simultaneously, built a state of the art outdoor classroom. How'd we do it?

90 Years of Recreation and Re-creation in Shenandoah National Park – Corrina Wendel

In honor of the Park's 90th Anniversary in 2026, we will explore how recreation in Shenandoah National Park has changed in the near century since the park's establishment. We will examine several laws, policies, and societal changes that greatly influenced how people spend time in Shenandoah. Participants will learn of new ways to approach old pastimes and ponder how people might enjoy Shenandoah 90 years from now.

Management, Program, & Administrative

Injecting Play Theory into your Program Planning Process – Steve Bobbitt

Of course outdoor adventure activities are play, but come join us for a deeper dive into the theory that can help you create a more comprehensive approach to developing programming for your participants. We will cover some classical theories and bring in some new concepts to help you both plan individual programs and help you diversity your entire offerings to help better meet the needs of your participants.

Trip Leader Prep Course: JMU's Unique Approach to Training Trip Leaders – Mitchell Hammer & Ava Pascarella

How do you transform an outdoor enthusiast into a competent, high-functioning student leader? This session breaks down the Trip Leader Prep Course at James Madison University, which is a 6-week experiential model designed to bridge the gap between skill building and leadership application. Beyond the specifics of the JMU program, we will explore student leader development that can be adapted to various institutional settings.

Plan B Playbook: Back up Games for When You Need it the Most – Ryan Andrews & Tanner Gillespie

This program aims to give you quick on the fly options for back-up games. We hope to teach back pocket games that can be played in virtually any environment and can be played with improvised supplies. These games will help fill any time and pair well with schedules that are a little more flexible than others.

Facilitation Skills: Sequencing Activities – Sasha Griffith

Come sharpen your skills in sequencing through participation. Groups of folks typically have walls up when we start our interaction with them. How do we break through those walls and get them to know and trust each other? Come see sequencing in action through participating and seeing how it works and how it doesn't work for you.

Collegiate Outdoor Orientation Programming Panel Discussion - Candance Brendler & Trey Smith

Collegiate outdoor orientation programs are a type of experiential learning that uses adventure-based activities in an outdoor setting to help incoming students transition to college and build community. These programs can look similar throughout a variety of institutions, and they may have notable differences. What activities should you offer? How do you build community? How much should you charge?

Risk Management

Ambushed by Myself: Growing Beyond Several Unexpected Leadership Pitfalls – Lester Zook

Our understanding of human elements contributing to outdoor adventure disasters has been growing recently. Leading the activity and leading the group, it could be argued that we actually have a much greater influence on outcomes. Our decisions, our direction, our attention to some facts and inattention to others, our teaching, whether accurate or not, our role modeling, for better or worse – all of these are amplified in their effect through the megaphone of our leadership role. This workshop will unpack issues in our leadership that can unwittingly contribute to a bad incident.

Wilderness Medicine Grab Bag – Christina Spohn

Grab your friends and test your wilderness medicine skills & knowledge! Folks will have the opportunity to move through several stations to learn or review wilderness medicine skills in a hands-on, team-based learning environment. Groups will work through practice scenarios to brush up on their decision-making skills. Supplies will be provided to practice the principles of improvised/field-based musculoskeletal injuries (sprains/strains/fractures). No experience is necessary - there will be options for all levels of experience.

Real-life Stories in Wilderness First Aid – Zoe Huff

During this interactive discussion, MEDIC SOLO Instructor Zoe Huff will facilitate learning / refreshing patient assessment knowledge and treatment skills for a few topics in Wilderness First Aid, through the lens of real-life scenarios. Come check your knowledge (trained or untrained), optionally participate in analyzing and treating the described real patient, learn what works and what doesn't, and hear the patient's outcome.

Technical Skills

Advanced Camping and LNT Skills – Jeff Marion

Designed for outdoor instructors with intermediate knowledge and skills, this in-depth session will describe science-based camping options such as dispersed natural site camping and camping on established or designated sites. Sustainable backpacking and camping practices for tent, tarp, and hammock camping that minimize chronic problems (campsite expansion & proliferation) and impact severity (tree damage/loss, vegetation trampling/loss, campfire impacts, creation of informal trails, and wildlife food attraction) will be presented and discussed. These are the best available practices based on recreation ecology research and Leave No Trace. Finally, the presentation will address the latest guidance on human waste and feminine hygiene, including what can be buried in catholes and what and when items should be packed out. A question/answer period will be included at the end.

Skin On Frame Boatbuilding - Joseph Herberger

Throughout this presentation attendees will learn about the history and benefits of skin on frame boats, develop a understanding or the processes involved in making them, and get a hands on experience with some of the most crucial steps.

Going Over the Edge: Foundations of Rappelling & Canyoneering – Allie Shellhammer

Topics will include evaluating routes and exit strategies, basic weather analysis and flash flood risk assessment, assessing anchor integrity, key elements of natural anchors, and an introduction to Single Rope Technique (SRT) and pull-cord systems. Rappel methods will be introduced, with slightly more focus on using an ATC with a friction hitch (prusik) backup. Additional discussion will cover the importance of leaders understanding vertical gear (even if not carried), common canyon emergencies, and the use of a fireman's belay. There will be limited hands-on components, focusing on knot tying (clove hitch, double fisherman's, and barrel knot, if time allows). However, participants will not be building anchors or full rappel systems. The emphasis is on conceptual understanding to improve safety, communication, and preparedness for future technical training. This session is best suited for participants interested in learning how technical canyoneering trips are planned and managed, and for developing baseline knowledge before pursuing more advanced, hands-on vertical skills courses.

Elegant Solutions for Outdoor Program Sites – Daniel Nellis

In this session Dan will discuss many ideas for adding quality details to any challenge course or outdoor program site. This can be done at low cost with woodworking skills, and equipment, some repurposed materials, and maybe even some volunteer labor.

Participants will take away stories about traditions that built community, problems solved, money saved, and fun we experienced. This workshop moves fast because there is much material to share.

On Belay! Belay Devices & Techniques – Casey Tucker

Belay On! Come learn about various belay devices and their uses, pros, cons, and ways to adapt in an emergency. Learn basic belay techniques on various devices and gain an understanding of when to choose the right belay device for the job. Get hands on with ATCs, assisted braking devices, munters, and maybe even your hips.

Swiftwater Rescue - Land Based Skills Development – David Harding & Patrick Griffin

Swiftwater rescue skills are a vital part of any paddler's toolkit when venturing onto moving water, especially when progressing through Class II–V rapids. In this 1.5-hour pool session, David and Patrick will cover essential swiftwater rescue fundamentals in a controlled environment. Participants will review and practice key techniques including contact rescues, throw-bag deployment, and multi-person rescue drills. The session will culminate in scenario-based practice that integrates all of these skills. PFDs and throw bags will be provided. Participants are encouraged to bring their own PFD and helmet if they prefer. This session is limited to 21 participants, so early registration is recommended.

Adaptive Skiing, Our Students Our Equipment – Kathleen Booth

During this workshop we will go through the specialized equipment used on the hill when skiing with students. We will discuss what students might use that equipment and why as well as work through real world examples with hands on experience using actual adaptive equipment.

Other (Access, Inclusion, youth work, programming)

Pushed to the Limit; How to Support Your Participants During Behavioral Escalations – Ryan Smith & Kevin Evers

This workshop defines the stages of behavioral escalation and provides a framework to help staff better understand, identify, and respond to challenging / escalated participant behaviors while on course. No prior skills or knowledge are required for conference attendees to take away some key points, add a few new skills to their "toolboxes" and learn something about supporting others and ultimately themselves from this content!

Designing Accessible and Inclusive Recreation Opportunities and Events – Amanda Presgraves & Ben Wyse

Historically, outdoor recreational activities in this region have required a high level of skill, knowledge, financial resources, and fitness to access. This session shares case studies and stories about culture change, as well as tangible ways to create a more welcoming space for people with diverse skill sets and interests in the outdoors.

Before We Float – Peter Pickering

Workshop on pre-trip planning for multiday wilderness river expeditions.

During this workshop we will identify and categorize the critical logistical components required for effective pre trip planning of multiday wilderness river expeditions, including personnel, equipment, environmental factors, and administrative constraints.

Supporting Gender Diverse Students in the Field – Taylor Petty & Liza Thomas

Gender diverse students are out there: as our staff, on our trips, and participating in our programming! They deserve instruction planned with them in mind. This workshop will take a look at common language used by the LGBTQ+ community, discuss areas of programming where we could be perpetuating the gender binary, and make a plan for supporting all students in the field. This workshop will be highly interactive with small group discussion and scenarios. Come willing to learn and make mistakes.

Adaptive and Inclusive Rock Climbing – George Florence

A hands-on introduction to adaptive rock climbing as an example of adaptive recreation. Come experience what goes into making rock climbing accessible to people with disabilities and try out some of the systems for yourself!

Humble Hikes: Mentorship, Advocacy, and Access in Youth Outdoor Programs – Amber Wendler & Xavier Duckett

The Humble Hikes program is an initiative of The Humble Hustle Company, a nonprofit organization based in Roanoke, Virginia, that supports the personal growth and well-being of underserved youth through meaningful outdoor experiences. Since 2017, the program has served over 1,000 youth by providing safe, supportive access to hiking, camping, and other nature-based learning opportunities at no cost to participants.

This workshop will explore how outdoor educators, facilitators, and program leaders can design and sustain impactful outdoor programs that center mentorship, advocacy, and inclusion for youth. Participants will examine strategies for fostering positive youth–adult relationships, reducing barriers to access, and creating outdoor experiences that promote confidence, coping skills, and long-term engagement.

The session will include co-facilitation from older youth participants in the Humble Hikes program, offering valuable insight into the role of mentorship and representation in outdoor spaces. Attendees will leave with practical tools and adaptable strategies to strengthen their own outdoor programs and better support youth from diverse backgrounds and abilities.