

Preparing for Camp Fairs: Strategies to Help Students

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Introduction

Summer camp employment provides excellent pre-service opportunities for college students who are majoring in physical education and recreation management. Through these experiences they can develop and enhance their teaching, leadership, and communication skills that will be beneficial in future employment.

Many camp directors have expressed that a camp employee should possess certain personality traits in order to be effective (Riley, 2001). An effective employee is a hard worker, possesses the hard skills related to specific camps, has a good work ethic, is a role model, and has prior related work experience. Another important personality essential for the camp employee is to be child-centered and compassionate of children attending the camp. Personality traits are also how a person thinks, feels and behaves in various employment situations (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). For example, Trotter (1998) suggested that camps should modify and adapt camp activities to meet the trendy demands of society. In doing this, the camp staff must also be able to adapt to these changes.

According to the American Camping Association (ACA), there are more than 10,000 day and resident camps in the United States where more than half a million people work as counselors, activity leaders, and program directors (Coutellier, 2001). The ACA and camp directors want to ensure that their camps can provide quality services and activities; therefore, they want to hire effective staff who can provide direction, promote self-confidence, and enhance self-esteem in the children attending the camps.

In an effort to help camp directors recruit effective camp personnel, the ACA has developed and sponsored camp fairs that are implemented at 80 universities across the United States (acacamps.org, 2001). These fairs typically attract large groups of prospective applicants from various fields (i.e., athletic training, exercise science, and social work). Attending camp fairs can provide the pre-service professional with opportunities to 1) network, 2) gather pertinent camp information,

3) obtain job interviews, 4) hone their communication skills, 5) improve their interviewing skills, and 6) obtain possible summer camp employment.

Unfortunately, many students attending camp fairs have little knowledge of what to expect and are not properly prepared to interact with the camp directors or recruiters in order to obtain an interview or possible summer employment. To help students prepare for the camp fair process, college professors can provide them with opportunities to develop and enhance the necessary skills to make the camp fair experience more beneficial. Since most students attend camp fairs to obtain interviews for summer camp employment, professors should provide in-class exercises that will help them be successful. This article provides classroom strategies and activities focusing on 1) how students should prepare to attend camp fairs, 2) what they should do while at the camp fair, and 3) what they should do after attending the camp fair. These activities will help the students be prepared and successful in obtaining job interviews and summer positions.

Preparing to Attend the Camp Fair

Prior to attending a camp fair, it is crucial for students to do their homework by investigating the components of the camp fair. First, the student should locate the ACA website (www.acacamps.org) to review the roster of participating camps and take the time to learn about them. Second, the student should select particular camps of interest and examine their philosophies, missions, and primary focuses (i.e., gender, individuals with disabilities, or religious). Preferences related to the camp size, resources, and activities deserve some prior consideration by the student as well.

Finally, students need to develop their resumes to give to potential employers. Camp directors suggest that a one-page resume would assist them in determining future staff (Riley, 2001). The resume should be simple and concise with bullets highlighting students' qualities and traits that would make them a good candidate for the camp position (Bannon, 1999). The resume should cover related work experience, educational credentials, extracurricular activities, contact information, and awards and honors.

The professor can assist students in being prepared to attend camp fairs by offering in-class opportunities for them to practice and develop the skills and activities described above. The following are two examples of class exercises that can opportunities for students to be prepared to attend the camp fairs.

Activity #1: Investigation of Camp Fairs

For this activity, have the students:

1. Locate the ACA webpage (<http://www.acacamps.org>).
2. Locate a camp fair that is being offered near the students' location

3. List the camps attending
4. Prioritize the list according to individual interest
5. List the first five choices for camps
6. Locate the camps' web pages to find additional information
7. Compare these camps according to (if available on webpage):
 - a. Population served
 - b. Mission statements
 - c. Type of camps
 - d. Benefits
8. Develop an information poster on one of the camps chosen (have students sign up so there are no repeats on information posters)

Activity #2: Develop the Resume

Have the students develop a resume to distribute at the camp fair. Professors should:

1. Provide the students with a resume template
2. Have students word process the resume
3. Have the students highlight specific, hard skills that are related to the specific camps that they are most interested.

What to Do at the Camp Fair

Students need to keep in mind their main objective for attending the camp fair is to seek additional information about the camps and possibly get an interview. Camp directors want students to obtain as much information as possible, examine the booth displays, read the brochures and fliers, and take time to view any multimedia productions (i.e., video loops or slides).

As a prospective employee, a student also needs to look and act professional when meeting the directors or recruiters. If possible, dress in business causal attire, be well groomed, and make eye contact to establish a rapport with the recruiter. The first impression given is usually a lasting one.

In addition to looking and acting professionally, the student should also be prepared to discuss the qualities and skills that make him or her good candidates for the camp position. By being prepared to state the skills and talents that set the individual apart from other students who are competing for the same job and having a concise resume, the student will appear and feel more confident, organized and focused during the camp fair.

Interaction with the camp directors or recruiters is essential. Through this interaction, not only can the directors learn about the prospective employees, the students

can learn more about the camp, the camp staff, and the resources available to the camp. Students need to remember that they are evaluating the camp, staff and resources as much as the camp directors are evaluating them. Moreover, students should pose questions to the directors/recruiters in order to gain more information about the camp. Answers to such questions can help the pre-service professional make a more informed employment decision.

In-class activities can help students begin to be prepared to interact with potential camp employers at a camp fair. The following are two examples of class exercises that provide opportunities to help students to have successful experiences at camp fairs.

Activity #3: Interest Question Development

For this activity, professors place students in small groups. The students should:

1. Investigate the pros and cons of the various camps of interest.
2. Brainstorm a list of questions to ask the camp directors or recruiters to find out more about the benefits of the camps. Figure 1 is a list of example questions. Questions about salary and fringe benefits should be asked when the camp has expressed a clear interest in hiring.

- What entry-level positions in (mention your career interest) are available at your camp?
- What type of person do you hire to fill them?
- What duties are required for the position?
- What skills or work experience do you look for when you recruit for these jobs?
- What are the primary responsibilities for this position would be expected to achieve?
- What challenges and opportunities are associated with the position?
- Does your camp have formal training programs, or do employees receive on-the-job training?
- How does the camp measure performance?
- How often are performance reviews given?

Figure 1: Possible Questions to Ask Potential Employers

Activity #4: Mock Camp Fairs

For this activity, the professor places the students in small groups to develop a camp information booth for a mock camp fair. The students will:

1. Develop information brochures (see activity #1) about different camps based on the camp webpage.
2. Contact the different camps for more information (i.e., brochures, flyers, web pages, etc.)
3. Develop a “mock” booth for at least 10 different camps.
4. Select students to pretend to be camp directors.
5. Other students from class attend the mock camp fair.
 - a. Dress appropriately
 - b. Interact with mock camp directors
 - 1.) Appropriate eye-contact
 - 2.) Asking appropriate questions (activity #3)
6. Reflect on mock camp fair experience.
 - a. Personal strengths in interactions
 - b. Personal weaknesses in interactions
 - c. Resume

What to Do After the Camp Fair

Before leaving the camp fair, the student should always ask for a business card to keep for their professional records. After visiting and speaking with camp recruiters, it is imperative to send thank you notes expressing appreciation for the recruiter's time and efforts. The best practice is to send a thank you note within 24 hours and include another copy of the resume. Also the thank you note can serve as an additional selling point for the student's abilities and skills that might not have been disclosed at the camp fair communications.

In some cases, the camp directors or recruiters may ask students for interviews. In this case, the student must be prepared to answer questions about his/her work experiences, philosophy, hard skills obtained, work ethic, morals, and other pertinent information to guide the director or recruiter to make an informed decision about hiring the individual.

The professor can help students develop appropriate thank you notes and be prepared for possible job interviews by offering opportunities for them to practice and develop the skills and activities described above. The following are two examples of in-class exercises that provide opportunities to help students be successful in making a good impression on the camp directors or recruiters.

Activity #5: Thank You Notes

The professor can provide the students with opportunities to practice writing thank you notes to send to camp directors. The following are some guidelines for writing and sending thank you notes:

1. Provide the students with a template for writing thank you notes
2. Utilize appropriate grammar
3. Send the thank you notes within 24 hours of the camp fairs.

Activity #6: Mock Interviews

The professor can help students be prepared when directors ask for interviews by setting up mock interviews with administrators, professors, or career development personnel. Figure 2 provides a list of possible interview questions.

1. How did you decide on this type of work?
2. What types of people do you like working with?
3. Why do you think this camp should hire you?
4. What strengths do you bring to this job; be specific?
5. What do you expect from the camp who hires you?
6. What are your job goals?
7. How would a co-worker describe you?
8. What are your hobbies and interests?
9. What do you know about our camp?
10. Tell me about yourself.
11. Why should we be interested in hiring you?

Figure 2: Example Interview Questions

Conclusion

Camp fairs provide an excellent opportunity for students to learn about various camps and acquire camp employment. Professors need to help pre-service professionals prepare to attend camp fairs so that they can get the most out of the experience and possibly acquire a camp position. This article emphasized in-class strategies for professors to share with their students when preparing to attend a camp fair. Figure 3 provides an overview of some of those tips.

Figure 3: Keys to Getting the Camp Job You Want:

- Research the camps that are coming to the camp fair and know either their philosophy or mission statement.
- Ask questions and gather more information to make the best decision possible.
- Network with camp directors.
- Highlight your best qualities and traits.
- Emphasize your personality.
- Acquire hard skills before seeking a job.
- Be committed to working the entire camping season.

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