



**ARKANSAS**  
OFFICE OF  
OUTDOOR RECREATION



# **LAND OF OPPORTUNITY**

**Exploring Workforce Needs in Arkansas's  
Growing Outdoor Recreation Industry**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Outdoor recreation represents a rapidly growing sector in the United States, contributing significantly to economic development, public health, and community well-being. In Arkansas, this sector contributes \$5 billion in value added to the state's GDP and has become a strategic priority as state leaders seek to leverage abundant natural resources to support jobs, tourism, and rural prosperity.<sup>1-3</sup> The establishment of the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation (AOOR) in 2021 under former Governor Asa Hutchinson and its subsequent expansion through Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders's 2023 Natural State Initiative underscore a strong policy commitment to developing the outdoor recreation economy and its workforce.<sup>2</sup>

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project partners with the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation (AOOR) to evaluate and strengthen the state's outdoor recreation workforce. AOOR aims to grow Arkansas's outdoor recreation economy, expand workforce and educational opportunities, and promote responsible stewardship of natural resources. To support these goals, this project assesses employer workforce needs, existing training and education programs, alignment between needs and program offerings, and best practices from other states. Ultimately, the project addresses the need for a skilled workforce to sustain industry growth, support local economies, and ensure safe and responsible recreation.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What skills do Arkansas outdoor recreation employers need from their employees?
2. What programs exist in Arkansas that train the outdoor recreation workforce?
3. What are the gaps in what these programs are providing compared to what employers say they need?
4. What best practices (i.e. models from other states) could be implemented to ensure a robust, well-trained outdoor recreation workforce in the future?

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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## **DEFINING THE OUTDOOR RECREATION WORKFORCE**

The scope of the outdoor recreation workforce has expanded over the last decade to include areas of education, manufacturing, health, and economic development in addition to traditional areas such as guiding and park management.<sup>4</sup> This broad scope underscores the need to develop a clear definition of the outdoor recreation workforce moving forward.<sup>4-5</sup>

## **OUTDOOR RECREATION EDUCATION & TRAINING LANDSCAPE**

Research highlights a complex training ecosystem in outdoor recreation that combines formal education, industry-specific certifications, and experiential learning, though evidence of effectiveness is mixed.<sup>6</sup> Scholars note changes in higher education and low awareness of career pathways in outdoor recreation may limit the expansion of academic programs moving forward.<sup>6-7</sup>

## **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES**

There are extensive opportunities and challenges in outdoor recreation workforce development. Key themes in opportunities that emerged include adapting training to local contexts, providing financial incentives to workers and employers, creating partnerships, and gathering community insights. However, challenges exist especially in Arkansas including workforce retention, barriers to recruitment, gaps in workforce skills, and long-term sustainability concerns.<sup>5,8-13</sup>

# METHODS

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We used a mixed-methods design to conduct our research. We conducted a statewide employer survey and two in-person focus groups. The survey asked employers to describe how important various soft, technical, operational, and digital skills are to their workforce. Focus group questions concentrated on skills employers need, gaps in skills compared to what they need, and workforce priorities. We conducted a content analysis of outdoor recreation education and training programs in Arkansas and a comparative review of workforce development strategies in six other states.

### Survey

Outdoor Recreation Employers



### Focus Groups

2026 Governor's Conference on Tourism and Outdoor Recreation



### Content Analysis

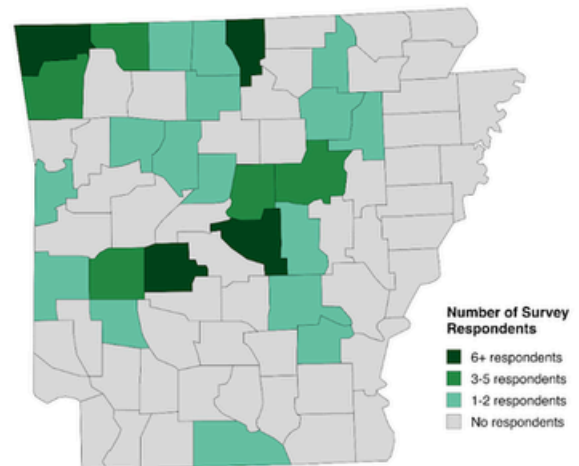
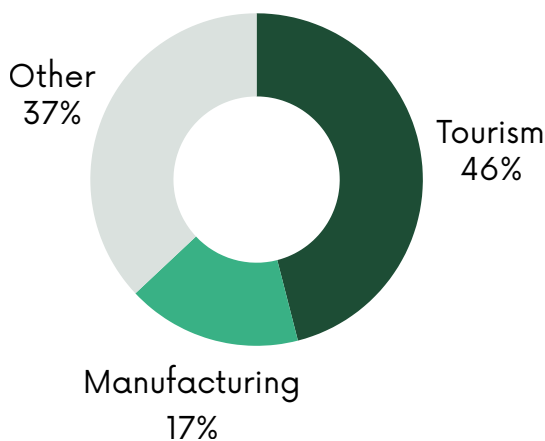
List of Educational and Training Programs Best Practices in Other States



# OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

This section outlines key findings from our study by research question. First, we will provide context on who our survey respondents and focus group participants were.

# DEMOGRAPHICS



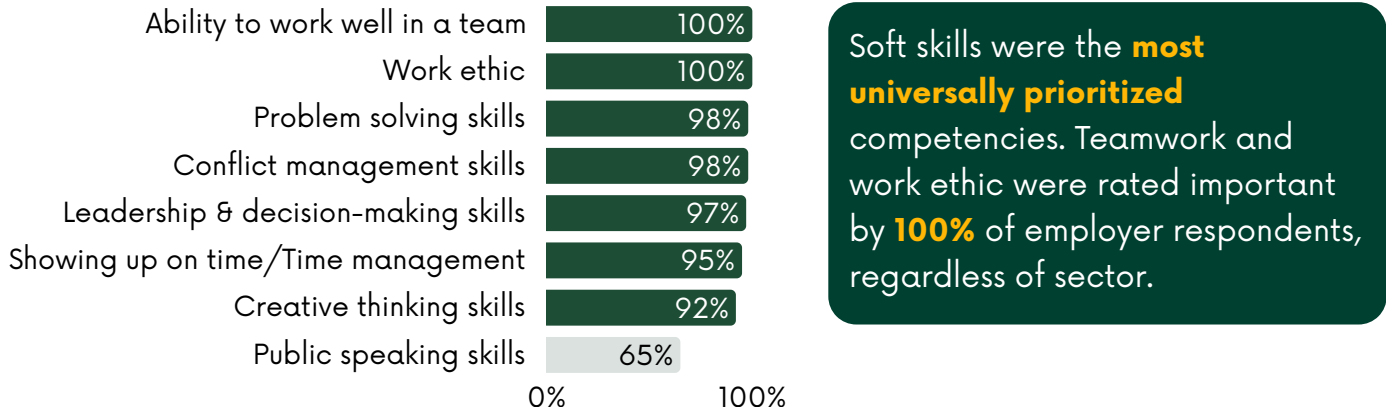
**Figure 2:** Survey Response by Sector (N=78)

**Figure 3:** Geographic Spread of Survey Respondents by County (N=78)

## RESEARCH QUESTION 1

### What skills do Arkansas outdoor recreation employers need from their employees?

First, as shown in Figure 4, Arkansas outdoor recreation employers we surveyed universally prioritize soft skills. Second, technical skill needs are industry-specific with needs diverging between manufacturing and tourism subsectors as shown in Figure 5.

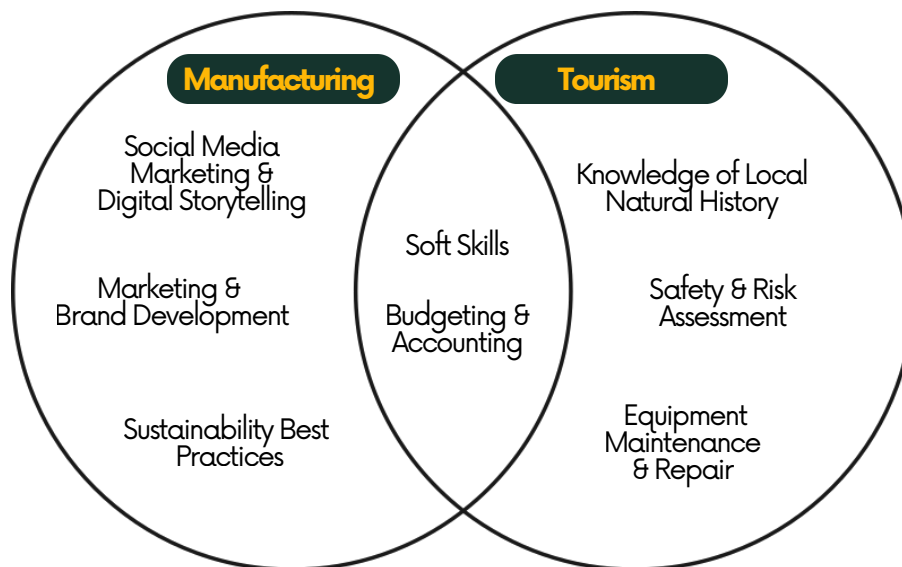


Soft skills were the **most universally prioritized** competencies. Teamwork and work ethic were rated important by **100%** of employer respondents, regardless of sector.

**Figure 4:** Soft Skills (% Reporting "Very or Somewhat Important")

**"Having the right people on our floor is as important as it's ever been... one thing we can do that the internet can't is the human connection."**  
 - Tourism Focus Group Participant

**"Nowadays they don't even call in...They'll work Monday, Tuesday, and if they don't like the job, you'll never hear from them again. And they won't even call back. They won't answer the call and they won't call back... I guess better hire somebody else."**  
 -A focus group participant describing lack of soft skills amongst some employees



**Figure 5:** Venn Diagram of skills required by subsector.

## RESEARCH QUESTION 2

### What programs exist in Arkansas that train the outdoor recreation workforce?

While Arkansas higher education institutions offer programs related to outdoor recreation in the form of four- and two-year degrees and certificates, employer reliance on informal on-the-job training signals a persistent gap between program offerings and industry demand.

**14**

4-Year Degree Programs

**3**

2-Year Degree Programs

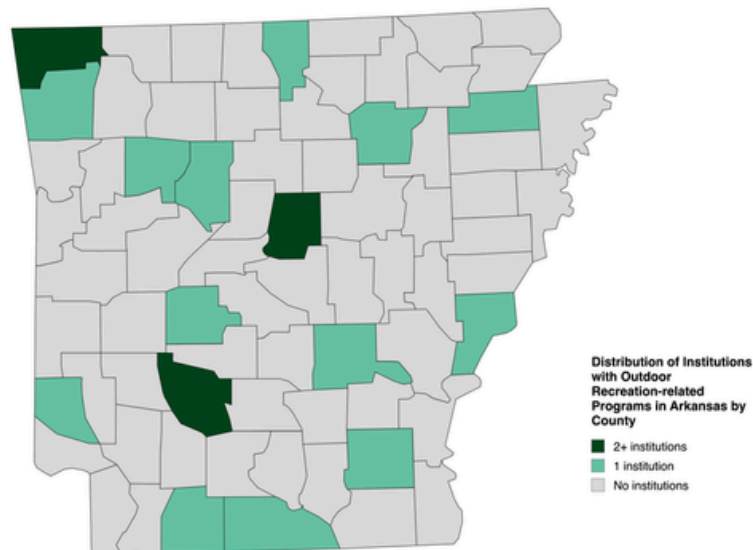
**10+**

Certificate Programs  
(NPC, NWACC)

Despite available formal programs, the focus group reported that most skill development happens **informally through hands-on experience**, which ranges from **two weeks to six months**, depending on the role.

"A lot [of new hires] came through some type of outdoor recreation or science class. But we had quite a few coming in that were actually afraid to walk through the woods."

**-Manufacturing Focus Group Participant**



**Figure 6:** Spread of Education Degrees in Arkansas.

## RESEARCH QUESTION 3

### What are the gaps in what these programs are providing compared to what employers say they need?

Gaps included both soft skills and technical skills where employers feel academic programs are not preparing workers for jobs in their organizations. This materialized a third gap of geographic access and workforce pipeline issues for employers.

GAP AREAS	DESCRIPTION
<b>Soft Skills</b>	Applicants frequently lack professionalism, reliability, and interpersonal skills; existing programs do not sufficiently emphasize these competencies
<b>Technical Skills</b>	Graduates are not fully prepared to apply skills in tool handling, business operations, marketing, and safety in real-world settings
<b>Geographic Access and Workforce Pipeline</b>	Training programs are concentrated in NWA and Central AR; the Delta and South AR are underserved, restricting rural workforce development. Low awareness of outdoor recreation careers limits the number of individuals entering the workforce pipeline

## RESEARCH QUESTION 4

### What best practices could be implemented to ensure a robust, well-trained outdoor recreation workforce in the future?

Best practices from other states (Colorado, Maine, Utah, Wyoming, Maryland, and North Carolina) show that workforce development must be a priority through state and regional collaborations, strategic planning, expansion of education and training programs, and increased access for rural workers.

### BEST PRACTICES IN OUTDOOR RECREATION WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



#### State & Regional Collaboration

- Official collaborations between state agencies on specific goals <sup>14-15</sup>
- Regional collaborations focused on a specific industry and employer-led <sup>16-17</sup>



#### Creating a Statewide Strategic Plan

- Strategic plans outside of SCORP with a workforce development focus or with workforce development as a major goal <sup>18-20</sup>



#### Prioritizing Rural Access

- Mobile + short-term certification & credential training for rural areas <sup>21</sup>
- Addressing seasonality <sup>22</sup>
- Business directory on website <sup>23</sup>



#### Expanding Credentialing, Certification & Education Programs

- Robust academic programs at universities and colleges <sup>26-30</sup>
- Activity-specific credentials and certifications <sup>24-25</sup>

# DISCUSSION

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Findings strongly align with the academic literature: soft skills are foundational across all outdoor recreation roles; technical needs are specific to both the manufacturing and tourism sectors; and widespread reliance on informal on-the-job training signals a persistent alignment gap between program offerings and industry demand. A one-size-fits-all approach to workforce development will likely not work; Arkansas needs both broad transferable skill development and targeted sector-specific training.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## SHORT TERM (1-2 YEARS)

### 1. Develop and Implement a Statewide Strategic Plan

Working across state agencies, make workforce development the primary focus or a major goal within the plan.

### 2. Expand Awareness and Marketing of Outdoor Recreation Careers

Increased online marketing and in-person presence at schools & job fairs.

### 3. Outdoor Recreation Business Directory

Make public access to jobs & businesses available & easy to find.

### 4. Strengthen Partnerships for Workforce Training

Partner with the Office of Skills Development to provide funding & assistance for on-the-job training.

### 5. Conduct Targeted Research

Focused specifically on needs in the manufacturing sector or rural access.

## INTERMEDIATE TERM (3-5 YEARS)

### 1. Develop and Promote Outdoor Recreation Education Pathways

Outreach & build partnerships with K-12 schools to promote existing outdoor recreation career pathways in Arkansas.

### 2. Establish Regional Workforce Collaboratives and Access to Training

Employer- & community-led planning around local workforce development.

## LONG TERM (6-10 YEARS)

### 1. Expand Higher Education Program Capacity

Increase funding for activity & skill-specific academic programs statewide.

### 2. Expand Credentialing and Certification Opportunities

Increase funding for activity & skill-specific programs which translate specifically to jobs needed currently or in the near future.

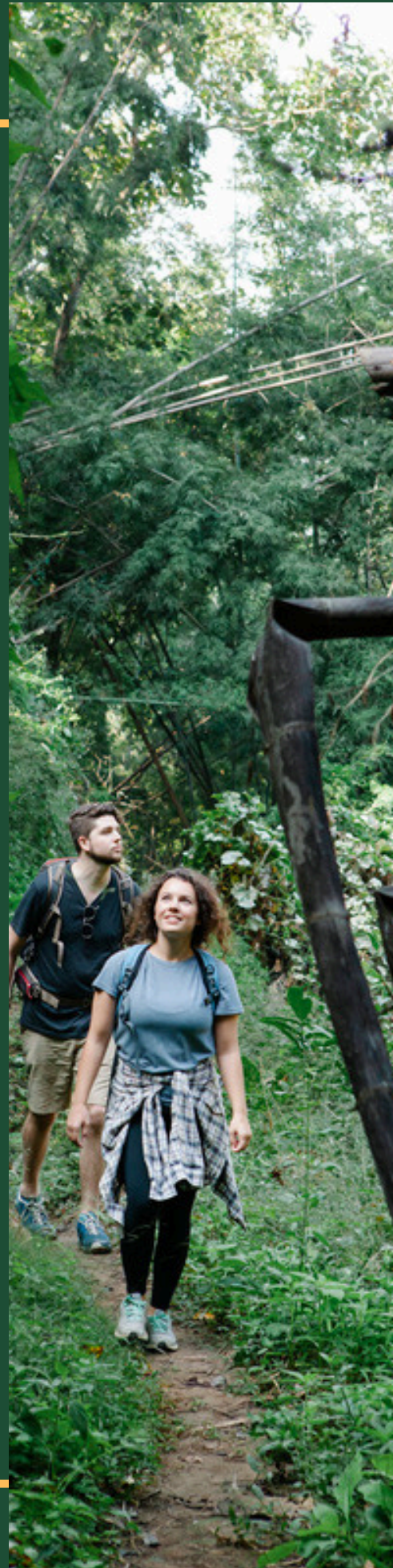
# CONCLUSION

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This research produces a detailed and actionable picture of Arkansas's outdoor recreation workforce landscape. Our study had three key findings:

1) Surveyed Arkansas outdoor recreation employers universally prioritize soft skills; 2) Technical skill needs diverge between manufacturing and tourism subsectors so training must be industry-specific; and 3) Despite institutions offering relevant four-year programs, widespread employer reliance on informal on-the-job training signals a persistent gap between program offerings and industry demand.

The recommendations offered in this report are grounded directly in the evidence gathered from Arkansas employers and validated against models proven effective in comparable states. By taking targeted steps to align training with industry needs, increase collaboration among stakeholders, and expand access to education and credentials, Arkansas can build a more resilient and competitive outdoor recreation workforce. A stronger workforce will not only support continued industry growth but will also advance broader goals of economic development, community vitality, and environmental stewardship across the state.



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