



Parks and Recreation Career Pathways

Jobs in operations, maintenance,
education, and recreational leadership



WORKING IN PARKS AND RECREATION

Beautiful natural spaces, public pools, youth sports, community arts—all these things help tie a community together, and none of them would happen without the work of those in parks and recreation. Many people who work in parks and recreation take something they already love—from aquatics to gardening—and turn it into a career. Others learn new skills, but bring a desire to educate, keep the public safe, or maintain parks and recreation facilities. Jobs in this field are often public-facing.

AREAS IN PARKS

Park operations and maintenance workers focus on the often complex care of plants and wildlife, or maintain recreation facilities and vehicles. Those in recreation deal directly with the public and serve as educators, trainers, and guides. Park rangers have a dual role, with some focused on education and others on law enforcement. Park specialists are positions which require significantly more education and offer an opportunity to play a larger part in planning the park environment and recreation programming.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Employees in parks and recreation work outside, which means that many entry-level positions are seasonal. Moving up to year-round, full-time positions, which spend more time in an office, means taking on more responsibility for supervision and planning and requires more experience and education. Workers are responsible for a variety of different environments and must be flexible and mobile to travel between worksites. Some job duties, such as tree climbing or operating heavy equipment, can be dangerous.

EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

Employees focused on recreation can look to other work in education-adjacent fields, with many jobs in the public sector. Those in parks operations will also have many options in the private sector. Most occupations in this area have “favorable” or “very favorable” employment growth prospects from 2018 through 2028 according to the New York State Department of Labor.

PARKS AND RECREATION JOBS & POSSIBLE ENTRY POINTS

■ PARK OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

Operations and maintenance workers keep every part of the parks system and other outdoor spaces safe and beautiful for the public, including gardens, forests, athletics fields, beaches, Greenstreets, and the grounds surrounding office buildings. Entry-level park service workers are responsible for the cleanliness and maintenance of public areas, are sometimes seasonal, and are often mobile – moving between different worksites. Gardeners and tree climbers and pruners require specific skills, such as caring for sensitive plants, operating heavy equipment, or safely climbing trees and using a chainsaw. Gardening work may require training in horticulture or a Commercial Pesticide Applicator certification. Becoming a park supervisor means taking on responsibility for conducting inspections, planning workloads, and training and overseeing a team while still doing fieldwork. Drivers of large vehicles will require a CDL.

Critical skills: physical abilities (lift 50 pounds, bend/squat, extended standing), use hand and power tools, follow instructions, courteous, driver's license; organization, analytical, and managerial skills for supervisory roles

■ RECREATION

Recreation workers fill parks, playgrounds, schools, and community centers with fun, healthy, and educational activities for the public. Entry-level positions such as playground assistants or recreation specialists are typically seasonal hires during the warmer months; many recreation professionals first gain experience here before moving up to full-time positions. Full-time workers are typically in a supervisory role, overseeing a team of seasonal workers who organize games and distribute equipment, and specialists who are skilled in particular athletics, arts, or craft work. Recreation directors and supervisors also reach out to assess their communities' needs and plan a program of activities to fulfill those needs. These higher positions typically require a college degree in a field such as recreation management, physical education, or the arts.

Critical skills: organization, manage group dynamics, verbal communication (to lead activities, instruct participants), courteous, interpersonal skills, expertise in a recreational activity; supervisors need to plan, delegate, and manage personnel and resources

■ PARK RANGERS

All park rangers have two main duties: safety and education. Urban park rangers are primarily educators who may guide guests on nature walks or canoeing, lead history tours, teach about the environment, and work with youth. They typically have prior training or experience in recreation or education, and have expertise in history, nature, and wildlife. Parks enforcement officers focus on safety and often have a law enforcement, security, or criminal justice background, and see the position as part of a career in law enforcement. All park rangers go through the training required to become deputized as special patrolmen and have the power to enforce the rules and regulations of the parks. Park rangers may start as seasonal workers and advance to full time associate and director positions with managerial and leadership responsibilities.

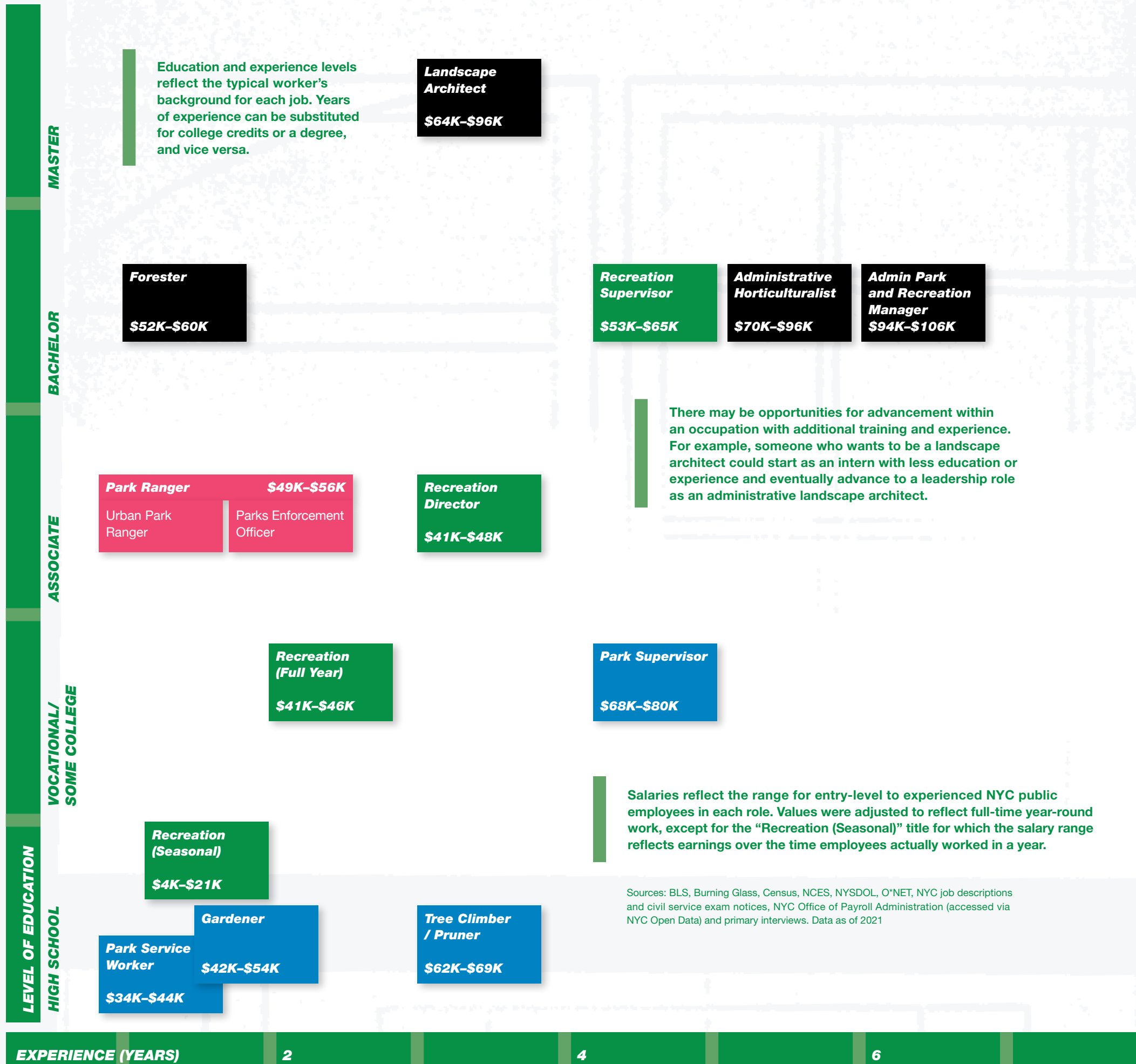
Critical skills: interpersonal and customer service skills, verbal communication and interpretation (i.e., fostering engagement and connection with an audience), work with children, teach, decision-making, first aid, physical abilities (extended standing or walking, lift and move barricades and equipment), driver's license

■ PARK SPECIALISTS

Specialist positions require leadership experience, specific professional training, or both. Those in parks operations or recreation who wish to take on a leadership role can advance to work as an administrative park and recreation manager, responsible for planning strategy, executing special projects and training, and coordinating and supervising activities across sites.

Workers interested in scientific and technical aspects of parks can become foresters, who maintain healthy wooded environments, or landscape architects, who plan and design outdoor features and oversee and inspect the execution of landscaping projects. Both jobs require a specific college degree and offer advancement opportunities to roles such as administrative horticulturalist or administrative landscape architect that combine technical and leadership skills. Landscape architects in senior positions need a NYS Landscape Architect license.

Critical skills: organize, manage, exercise sound judgement to independently make big decisions, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, driver's license, extended standing or walking, operate equipment



PARKS AND RECREATION PROGRAMS IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

| COLLEGE NAME | PROGRAM NAME | Certificate / Training | Associate Degree | Bachelor's Degree | Advanced Certificate | Master's Degree | Doctoral Degree |
|--|---|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| NYC | | | | | | | |
| BROOKLYN BOTANICAL GARDEN | Horticulture | ● | | | | | |
| CUNY BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Therapeutic Recreation | ● | | | | | |
| CUNY BROOKLYN COLLEGE | Horticulture | ● | | | | | |
| | Physical Education | | ● | ● | | | |
| CUNY CITY COLLEGE | Health and Nutrition Sciences | | ● | | | | |
| | Landscape Architecture | | | | | ● | |
| CUNY KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Physical Education, Recreation and Recreational Therapy | ● | | | | | |
| CUNY LEHMAN COLLEGE | Recreation Education | | ● | ● | | | |
| | Exercise Science | | ● | | | | |
| | Environmental Science (Urban Environmental Management) | | ● | | | | |
| CUNY QUEENS COLLEGE | Physical Education | | ● | ● | ● | | |
| | Environmental Science | | ● | | | | |
| NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN | Horticulture | ● | | | | | |
| HUDSON VALLEY | | | | | | | |
| DUTCHESS COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Exercise Science & Wellness | | ● | | | | |
| ROCKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Human Performance Studies | | ● | | | | |
| SULLIVAN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Physical Education Studies | | ● | | | | |
| | Recreation Leadership: Fitness | | ● | | | | |
| | Recreation Leadership: Sports Management | | ● | | | | |
| SUNY AT PURCHASE COLLEGE | Environmental Science | | | ● | | | |
| LONG ISLAND | | | | | | | |
| FARMINGDALE STATE COLLEGE | Health Promotion and Wellness | | | ● | | | |
| | Horticultural Technology Management | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| NASSAU COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Physical Education Studies | | ● | | | | |
| STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY | Ecosystems and Human Impact | | | ● | | | |
| SUFFOLK COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Physical Education Studies | | ● | | | | |
| NEW JERSEY | | | | | | | |
| BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Exercise Science | ● | ● | | | | |
| | Sports Management | ● | ● | | | | |
| HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Physical Education Studies | ● | ● | | | | |
| KEAN UNIVERSITY | Recreation Administration | | | ● | | | |
| MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY | Environmental Science and Management | | | | ● | ● | |
| RUTGERS UNIVERSITY-NEW BRUNSWICK | Ecology, Evolution, and Natural Resources | | ● | ● | ● | ● | |
| | Landscape Architecture | | ● | ● | ● | | |
| WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY | Physical Education | | ● | | | | |
| ONLINE | | | | | | | |
| PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY—WORLD CAMPUS | Ecosystem Management | | | | | ● | |
| | Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management | | ● | | | | |
| UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA—ONLINE | Environmental Management | | ● | | | | |
| | Health Education | | ● | | | | |

These educational programs reflect areas of study commonly requested or required by employers for the parks and recreation jobs described in this brochure, but it is not an all-inclusive list. Some parks and recreation jobs require or prefer workers to have a post-secondary education but do not specify a particular area of study. Or, some jobs require specialized study or expertise in an art, craft, sport, or other recreational activity not captured in this table. Review the requirements for individual job descriptions, and check to see if any of the schools listed above or other local institutions offer programs in the desired area of study.

Private institutions also offer related programs. Check in your local area or for online programs.