

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND EXPANSION

Finding and keeping a committed and diverse staff





Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

■ by Carrie L. Chandler and CCCA Staff

Staffing for summer camp is full of ups and downs. Whether it's the challenge of finding enough male staff, increasing the diversity on your team or finding staff who are committed enough to stick with the job through thick and thin, many CCCA member camps are searching for tactics, ideas and channels through which to fill their staff roster each summer. While summer may have just ended, it's never too early to start working on building next summer's team. ▶



Campers as Future Staff

The easiest place to begin casting the net is at camp. “I try to be intentional about getting to know the older campers,” said Kelsey Paterson, director of Ponderosa, Mt. Hermon (Felton, California), “because camper retention leads to staff retention.” In the past, this included a leadership training program for older campers, which is in the process of revision. “This was a great funnel for campers to become staff,” Paterson noted, “a lot of staff came through the program.”

Greg Anderson, president of Inspiration Point (Vining, Minnesota), concurs, noting that a camp’s high school programming will impact its ability to convert campers into staff. “We need a robust high school summer camp program so we can continue to attract campers beyond their younger years. Without that, we lose the relationship and connection right when we want to hire them,” he said.



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Existing Staff as Future Staff

Encouraging current staff members to return offers great benefits to a camp. Returning staff bring a level of experience and knowledge that is vital to a successful summer program.

Prioritizing staff by pouring into them throughout the summer is key to retention. According to Kent Biery, executive director of Summer’s Best Two Weeks (SB2W) (Boswell, Pennsylvania), “Staff are the most important part of our ministry, so we strive to invest in them.” To this end, SB2W provides focused discipling by the leadership team for each of the staff and holds special events just for staff, like worship nights and special speakers, throughout the summer.

At Trout Creek Bible Camp (Corbett, Oregon), executive director Joe Falhman creates a culture of belonging. “It’s letting people know that you care about them and being involved with them personally and individually.”

The staff at Trout Creek is volunteer-based, with only a few positions receiving payment, so finding ways to retain staff is important. “It’s about listening to people and caring for them, as well as challenging them and holding them to a high standard,” said Falhman.

During the summer, Falhman will go the extra mile to do little things for his staff. Coffee runs, evening meals out and notes of appreciation go hand-in-hand with in-depth Bible studies and discipleship for each staff member.

Julie McClain, ministry assistant at Sky Ranch Horn Creek (Westcliffe, Colorado), echoed the need to invest in the staff’s spiritual growth. “We are responsible for the staff God has entrusted to us,” she noted, “not just to utilize them but to shepherd them — as they are the flock in our care and their spiritual growth and personal care is just as much our ministry and responsibility as the guests we serve.”

Another way to encourage current staff to return is to connect with anyone interested in working another summer before they leave camp. “I try to be intentional with staff that show an interest in returning,” Paterson shared. “During the summer, I talk with those staff about how they can grow in leadership, and which positions they might want next summer.” If they see that there is an opportunity for growth, then returning to camp becomes their next step in ministry.

In the May/June 2024 issue of *InSite*, Evan Liewer of Forest Home (Forest Falls, California) wrote a feature article focused on building a culture at camp that leaves current staff clamoring to return the next summer. Liewer stated, “The key to getting staff to return is creating an environment of a healthy culture, high trust and wild fun.”

While summer is the prime time to connect with current staff, maintaining those relationships throughout the year is just as important. Both Inspiration Point and Trout Creek also invite staff back to work retreat groups in the spring and fall.

Falhman explained that their full-time staff try to attend summer staff’s activities and visit them on campus. “We also host a monthly Bible study at someone’s house, where we do a study and just hang out,” he said. Time like this keeps staff connected and reminds them that you care about them throughout the year.

Social media and email are an easy way for camps to connect with former staff. “We use social media to share updates and content that reminds them they are part of the SB2W family,” said Biery. Emailing a monthly or quarterly newsletter to keep former staff updated on current camp happenings helps them feel like they are a part of things all year long.

While social media is the easiest option, other ways of communication can make an impact as well. Anderson shared that full-time staff at Inspiration Point will “drop [former staff] a note of appreciation — on a piece of paper, placed in an envelope with a stamp! They love to get mail, and communicating like this is unlike the flood of texts they get otherwise.” ▶



New Contacts as Future Staff

Many camps utilize former staff to help reach new staff. Mt. Hermon has a program that sets up past staff as “finders” — staff who will receive a bonus if they recommend someone who ends up getting hired. “It has been huge,” Paterson shared, “and it keeps us in contact with summer staff returners and alumni.”

Having a presence on college campuses is also a way to meet and connect with future staff. Beyond hosting a table at a career fair with candy and giveaways, setting up a time to speak at Christian groups that former staff take part in helps camps meet like-minded students. Hosting a gathering somewhere on campus or a nearby restaurant where former staff and campers can bring friends is another way to reach out to new staff prospects.

Beginning early allows time to build relationships throughout the year. “Our full-time/year-round staff travel to campuses during the months of October and November to begin connecting with prospective staff,” said Biery. “That networking time in the fall sets us up to have continued conversations through the winter months as students are making decisions for the upcoming summer.”

At SB2W, Biery and his team have created fall leadership retreat weekends to connect with high schoolers interested in leading. “The target audience is students who play leadership roles in their church youth groups or at school, or simply want to be influencers of their peers,” he shared. The weekends consist of training students to lead their peers, create a healthy group culture and help those who are hurting. “High school students who attend these weekends are the kinds we want on our summer staff, and it has become a good opportunity for us to spend time with them and talk about summer staff ministry.”



The Power of Camp *A CCCA recruitment initiative*

CCCA’s recruitment initiative, The Power of Camp, has received a grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust to help with camp summer staff recruitment. With that grant, we have:

- Hired a publicist to pitch the benefits of working at camp to media outlets, bloggers, podcasters and publications.
- Created and deployed videos that explain why young adults should work at camp. These are available to CCCA members for their own use.
- Gathered testimonials of youth workers on their camp experience and will post those graphics on social media.
- Ran social media ads targeting 18- to 24-year-olds who could work at camp.
- Hired campus ambassadors to share about working at camp with their classmates through sponsoring campus events.

Access The Power of Camp videos and more recruitment tools at www.ccca.org/go/tpoc.

If you have a relationship with a college or university or are attending a camp fair on campus and you’d like CCCA to resource your contacts with promotional materials about working at camp, please email mreding@ccca.org.

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Diversity of Future Staff

God’s Word tells us in Revelation 7:9 that every nation, tribe, people and language will be gathered at the throne of God. Paul Coty, vice president of field ministries and development at Young Life, said, “Whether you go from the tower of Babel to the upper room, diversity has always been part of the heart of God’s kingdom.” Regarding Revelation 7:9, Coty noted, “I don’t believe theologically that we’re supposed to wait until we get to heaven to do that. It’s a kingdom mandate now.”

As we look at the United States in recent years, there have been significant ethnic shifts in its population. For example, in Texas, the Hispanic population is now the state’s largest demographic group. In California, no race or ethnic group constitutes a majority of its population, according to the 2022 American Community Survey.

No matter where your camp is located, the communities you serve will continue to become more diverse. Therefore, our camp staff must reflect the diversity of those we wish to serve. For campers from minority ethnic groups, seeing staff members who look like them in leadership positions can be empowering, showing them that they belong and can aspire to similar roles, contributing to their sense of identity and self-worth.

Sean McFeely, executive director of Oasis Ministry Ventures (Lake Hughes, California), has spent 37 years in Christian camping, primarily with a focus on serving non-dominant cultures. Having diversity on his staff matters “because we’re reaching Southern California, one of the most diverse areas in the U.S.,” McFeely said. For example, more than 130 languages are spoken in the L.A. Unified Public School District.

“If we want our camps to reflect the diversity of our country, our staff is a good place to start,” McFeely stated. “It’s more likely that you can recruit diverse campers if you have a diverse staff.”

Reaching into communities where people don’t look like you can be intimidating for some people. McFeely suggested building relationships with churches and ministries in the areas you hope to recruit from.

Coty pointed out that intentionality is key to growing representation of different races and ethnic groups on your staff. “Without a plan, there are no intentional steps. Without intentional steps, you have something that is aspirational at best.” But it won’t be something that happens quickly or easily. Coty added, “This is not like turning a light off and on. It’s a process that has multiple layers and takes many years.”

An important aspect to note, when it comes to hiring diverse staff, is the importance of having more than one person on your team who looks different than everyone else. Because a person of color has likely had different life and cultural experiences than your white staff members, it’s important for that person to have at least one other staff member that they can relate to. Coty explained, “There will be certain pain points or frustrations that others won’t understand. You need to have somebody else they can relate to who looks like them and understands them.”

McFeely recommends these books as tried and true resources for training on diversity: *Ministering Cross-Culturally* by Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *The Ten Lenses* by Mark Alexander Williams and *Gracism* by David A. Anderson. ►

Try This!

New and creative recruitment ideas from around the movement

Camp leaders are innovative in their recruitment strategies and have generously shared what's been working for them.

Nate Parks, executive director at Berea Ministries (Hebron, New Hampshire), connected with Beth Houdyshel, a former year-round staff member who was traveling across the country in a van. Parks asked her to make stops on college campuses along the way. Houdyshel was then hired by Berea to help with recruitment and has visited nearly 30 campuses. While on campus, she spends time at job fairs, speaking to college classes and catching up with past staff members.

This past winter, Riverside Bible Camp (Story City, Iowa) hosted "Brain Breaks" in nearby college towns where college students get to take a break from studying, enjoy some good food and connect with other young adults. This is a great way to connect with previous summer staff and meet new students who could serve on summer staff.

A participant in the recruiting RoundTable last February shared that when they are on recruiting visits, they'll text former staff members saying, "Hey, I'm on campus! Where are you? I'm bringing you cookies." As the cookies are delivered, this year-round team member connects with past staff members and their friends to see if they would consider working at camp for the summer.

Looking for more ideas?

Take advantage of CCCA's recruitment tool kit. That's your one-stop shop for recruiting resources. The guide includes:

- Social media graphics to post as your own
- *InSite* articles
- Excellence in Training Webinars
- Recruitment quick tips
- Job descriptions
- Blog posts on the benefits of working at camp
- Links to ads, radio spots and other media for your use

Visit www.ccca.org/go/toolkit to access the tool kit.



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship



Photo courtesy of Sunset Lake

Gen Z Challenges and Opportunities

During a CCCA Excellence in Training Webinar in January 2024, Tanita Maddox, D.Min., associate regional director for Young Life, shared that Gen Z can present unique hiring challenges in Christian camping. When asked what CCCA members are seeing when it comes to Gen Z, attendees responded with answers like:

- They seem afraid to commit to something because something “better” may come along later.
- They demand boundaries, even unrealistic ones.
- [They] have fewer soft skills.
- They don’t seem to be able to handle the amount of work [or] responsibility that we have trusted [same-aged] staff with in the past.
- Gen Z is not readily accepting of leadership.

Maddox explained that those trends and experiences are not unique to Christian camping; it’s happening everywhere. She shared several things about Gen Z that help give context to the perceptions many CCCA members shared.

For example, Gen Z has a high amount of pressure compared to what most of us experienced at their age. With social media and online media consumption available constantly, people growing up as Gen Z have far more people to compare themselves to. They’re constantly exposed to a message that they are not enough. Therefore, the millions of voices outside of a person’s immediate circle have more influence over a person’s values, worldview and identity.

According to psychologists, the number one question Gen Z is asking is, “Am I safe?” But this question is not just about physical safety. They’re wondering if they are safe emotionally, intellectually and psychologically and if they will have safety from risk, harm, embarrassment, discomfort, opposition or failure.

People in Gen Z have grown up doing school lockdown and active shooter drills. Depending on their age during the pandemic, many in Gen Z suffered social, emotional, intellectual and psychological development delays.

Friendships and relationships can end on social media (rather than in real life) through unfollowing or blocking, meaning there are no conversations about resolving relational issues, instead, they are just cut off. Embarrassing stories or experiences caught on photo or video are shared instantly and broadly, with or without someone’s knowledge, which leads them to believe that failure or mistakes carry a higher risk of exposure.

Offer More Than a Job

Gen Z doesn’t see themselves as an employee or a cog in the process. They see themselves as something to be invested in, which means you need to show what you will pour into them. Maddox shared several things that you can offer that will show a potential Gen Z staff member how valued they would be in your organization.

Mentoring

Gen Z is looking for mentoring, not just job-related, but holistically. Maddox suggests that they need help to cope and process through their emotions, mental health and day-to-day situations and need to know that you care about them.

Dialogue

Maddox explained that Gen Z employees want a two-way feedback loop where they understand that there is a schedule for this to happen and that they’ll have a chance to give you feedback, not just receive it from you. They want to work with us, not for us, and the chance to give feedback is important to them. In general, Gen Z is worried that relational breakdown will happen in conflict, so having a regular cycle of two-way dialogue helps ease that fear.

Skills

According to Maddox, you need to make connections between hard-skill tasks and the soft-skill development they’ll gain from a job with your camp. They may be wondering, “How does working at this camp help me get to where I want to go?” In addition to explaining this to potential staff, there’s value in showing existing staff how new skills will be built on what they gained this year if they return next summer.



The importance of a strong staff cannot be overstated. “Mediocre facilities or average recreational options can easily be overcome with a top-notch staff,” said Anderson. “Likewise, state-of-the-art facilities and world-class recreation can be torpedoed by a poor staff. This area is worth the time and effort required to hire and train the best staff possible.”

Casting the net is a necessary part of the staffing process, but camps can take heart in the fact that they aren’t alone in the process. “When God brings about a ministry ... it is His responsibility to provide all that is needed, including the staff to carry out our mission,” McLain notes. “If we are not looking to and petitioning the Lord for His provision, wisdom and blessing, then the task will be futile.” ■



Carrie L. Chandler is a freelance writer and also serves as program director at Camp New Dawn (Chickamauga, Georgia) each summer. Along with her writing and camp work, she home-schools her three children and helps her husband farm on the fourth-generation family farm where they live.