



# CULTURAL RELEVANCY IN THE OUTDOOR FIELD

## Beyond a Conversation: A Commitment to Action

*A report on our 2014 Cultural Relevancy Convening and the actionable outcomes that emerged.*

By the Foundation for Youth Investment  
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February 3, 2015

## Executive Summary

On October 15, 2014, the Foundation for Youth Investment hosted a Cultural Relevancy Convening in Oakland, California, to strategically discuss ways to increase and maintain diversity at the staffing and leadership levels within organizations in the outdoor field. Having invited 25 representatives from 20 organizations across the Bay Area, the group set out to achieve the following:

1. Re-frame the typical “diversity conversation” as an organizational development conversation in order to consider strategies that support outdoor programming organizations with a strong, culturally-driven mission, vision, and diverse staff to expand their ability to scale.
2. Define *scalability* as the ability of an organization to increase its staffing, influence of board members, and/or its political voice.
3. Apply “Design Thinking” (a Stanford based framework for innovation) to explore the barriers of scalability of culturally relevant organizations within the outdoor field.
4. Develop innovative strategies to increase the scalability of culturally relevant outdoor organizations.

Through a process of authentic conversation and rigorous brainstorming occurring in small teams, the individuals in attendance resoundingly arrived at the same conclusion. In order for significant and sustainable change to occur within organizations and the outdoor field as a whole, the front-line professionals need support as they often find themselves alone in their drive for increased cultural relevancy.

The types of support most urgently needed were identified, and the Foundation for Youth Investment reaffirmed its commitment to the cultural relevancy movement and to the outdoor community by committing to the implementation of the following three programs.

**Outdoor Educators Institute:** Staff and Leadership Development opportunity for youth ages 18-26 who are eager to become the next generation of outdoor leaders and educators. Targeting young adults from economically challenged urban communities, specifically those of racially and socio-economically diverse backgrounds, OEI provides a variety of outdoor skills and professional development training to create a pathway to employment within the outdoor field.

**Rising Leaders:** Convenings for Culture Shifters to support the professional development of diverse leaders who currently hold entry to mid-level positions within outdoor programming organizations and are enthusiastic about affecting culture change within their organizations and the field as a whole.

**Cultural Relevancy Institute:** Organization and Leadership Development targeted at upper management of outdoor organizations who self-identify as wanting support in their efforts to increase the diversity and cultural relevancy within their organization. Through guided facilitation and coaching, teams will create and implement plans that shift their organization’s policies and procedures and provide fast-tracked and tangible outcomes.

The Foundation for Youth Investment is committed to leading the movement towards creating more equitable opportunities for people of all backgrounds, and it is our firm belief that these programs will do exactly that.

## A Brief History

The Foundation for Youth Investment (FYI) is committed to connecting youth to nature by eliminating barriers, providing resources, and promoting outdoor programming as essential for building healthy lives and inspiring future stewards of the planet. We recognize that those barriers are both logistical (i.e. gear, transportation) and cultural. The *2013 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report* by the Outdoor Foundation notes that in 2012, of the 142 million people who enjoyed outdoor recreation, 70 percent of those participants were white. With little diversity at the participant and staffing levels, the field finds itself in search of solutions to address this issue.

In 2011, FYI began to focus on the need for increased cultural relevancy in the outdoor field, publishing a report entitled *The Cultural Relevancy in Outdoor Youth Programming*, which found that a multi-pronged approach to addressing this issue would produce the shift needed in the outdoor education field. Among the identified areas for improvement were: recruiting youth from underserved or under-represented populations for outdoor programming, developing relevant programming and curriculum, hiring diverse staff that reflects the population served, and diversifying board membership to reflect the culture and diversity of the communities being served.

In 2014, building off of the 2011 report and amidst growing urgency in the field, FYI planned a convening to reflect on key aspects of cultural relevancy in the field today. Prompted by the timely release of the 2014 Green 2.0 report *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, which stated that “despite increasing racial diversity in the United States, the racial composition in environmental organizations and agencies has not broken the 12%-16% ‘green ceiling’ that has been in place for decades,” FYI used the October Cultural Relevancy Convening to think strategically about increasing and maintaining diversity at the staffing and leadership levels within organizations.

## The Cultural Relevancy Convening, October 15, 2014

The Foundation for Youth Investment defines cultural relevancy as the ability to effectively reach and engage communities and their youth in a manner consistent with the cultural context and values of that community, while effectively addressing the disparities of diversity and inclusion within an organization’s entire structure.

In preparation for the October Cultural Relevancy Convening, we began by organizing a think tank of eight practitioners to analyze the findings of the recently released Green 2.0 report, to think critically about barriers to a successful event, and to find ways of addressing these barriers. The following topics were identified as challenges to holding a convening to reflect on cultural relevancy:

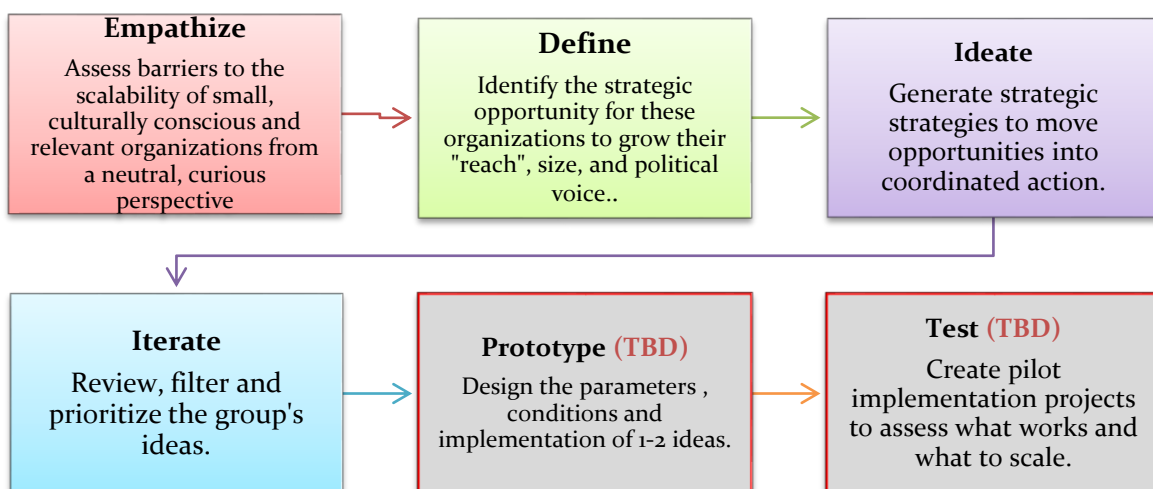
- Lack of acceptance of the issue of cultural relevancy by larger organizations functioning through the institutionalized white culture can result in time spent attempting to prove or name the problem rather than spending time on solution-oriented thinking.
- A broad audience with varying levels of understanding and undertaking of the issue can result in imbalanced conversations that attempt to re-name the problem rather than address it strategically.
- Gatherings of like-minded people can become a venue for sharing personal triumphs and struggles, impacting the group's ability to shift into "design-thinking" to create strategic interventions that impact the collective movement of cultural relevancy.

In response to these challenges, FYI narrowed the audience to primarily smaller, diverse organizations and leaders. FYI believed these individuals and organizations understood the issue and seemed to be actively engaged in strategy finding. Additionally, FYI decided to utilize the convening to support participants' capacity to create strategic and collective interventions that would have significant impact within the movement of cultural relevancy.

At the convening, twenty-five representatives from across sections of 20 different organizations joined FYI in framing ideas for implementation that would allow the group to begin addressing this pressing problem. Specifically, the convening engaged practitioners to achieve the following four goals:

1. Re-frame the typical "diversity conversation" as an organizational development conversation in order to consider strategies to support outdoor programming organizations with a strong, culturally-driven mission, vision, and diverse staff to expand their ability to scale.
2. Define "scalability" as the ability of an organization to increase its staffing, influence of board members, and/or its political voice.
3. Apply "Design Thinking" (a Stanford based framework for innovation) to explore the barriers of scalability of culturally relevant organizations within the outdoor field.
4. Develop innovative strategies to increase the scalability of culturally relevant outdoor organizations.

In order to advance the collective capacity to think from a strategic, innovative lens, FYI applied Stanford Design School's Innovation Framework, which includes the following steps (to read more about this framework go to <https://dschool.stanford.edu/groups/designresources/>):



Through this process, while fostering authentic dialogue and creative thinking, what we heard was that culture shifters—often lone voices of color championing diversity and cultural relevancy within an entrenched white culture— working in outdoor organizations need support. Not infrequently, culture shifters hold entry to mid-level positions within their organizations, have limited political voice to influence major change, and have limited leadership opportunities to move into management and/or board membership. It was evident that culture shifters are eager to receive support in establishing and expanding their network of like-minded people, strengthening their professional capacity, and supporting their organizations' leadership in understanding and undertaking the issue of cultural relevancy.

## The Outcomes

As part of the commitment to Cultural Relevancy, efforts need to be created and supported that will attract and retain talented people of color across the environmental movement. In thinking about supporting pathways that will impact this barrier, the following programs emerged from the cultural relevancy convening.

1. **Cultural Relevancy Institute: *Organization and Leadership Development***

The Foundation for Youth Investment, in partnership with the Youth Development Network, will sponsor the second Cultural Relevancy Institute (previously known as the Cultural Competency Youth Impact Series), a workshop series targeting upper management participation. This program will lead small teams through a process whereby participants explore their organization's cultural competency, through which they will design and implement shifts in policies, procedures, and programs to optimize engagement and retention of a more diverse population of staff and participants. This second cohort will participate in 2015.

2. **Rising Leaders: *Convenings for Culture Shifters***

Our goal is to support the professional development of diverse rising leaders who currently hold entry to mid-level positions within outdoor programming organizations and who are enthusiastic about affecting culture change within their organizations and the field as a whole. Through a series of workshops designed to strengthen the leaders' capacity to affect change, this learning community will develop their professional skills within a safe and supportive network of like-minded leaders. The first cohort in the Rising Leaders program will participate in 2015.

3. **Outdoor Educators Institute: *Staff and Leadership Development***

The Outdoor Educators Institute develops the next generation of culturally relevant outdoor educators and leaders by building competencies and leadership skills in young adults ages 18-26. OEI targets young adults from economically challenged urban communities, specifically those of racially and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. As part of the commitment to cultural relevancy, FYI is changing the model from a 10-week intensive program to an evening and weekend program that covers a 3-month period, making OEI a more accessible and viable option for a greater part of the community. The first cohort under this new structure will participate in 2015.

## Conclusion

The challenges facing the cultural relevancy movement in the outdoor field are numerous, and the solutions, while easy to state, are not always easy to achieve. To make the field of outdoor education and programming more culturally relevant, the field must recruit more youth from underserved or under-represented populations for outdoor programming, develop relevant programming and curriculum, hire diverse staff that reflects the population served, and diversify board membership to reflect the culture and diversity of the communities being served.

Focusing on the issue of staffing and leadership within organizations, the October Cultural Relevancy Convening identified several strategic opportunities through which FYI can directly begin to break down the barrier of diversity, improve retention of staff of color, support their upward transition into leadership positions, and encourage shifts in policies and procedures.

The three programs offered by FYI: the Cultural Relevancy Institute, the Rising Leaders program, and the Outdoor Educators Institute target the three main categories of an organization's staffing structure. By recruiting and training talented people of color who are eager to become outdoor leaders that connect their local communities to the outdoors, we create employment pathways into the field of outdoor education.

By organizing a cohort model for rising leaders who are passionate about their professional development and their capacity to affect change, FYI will help create a community of like-minded individuals who learn from and support each other as they collectively continue to create urgency around the need for cultural relevancy.

Finally, by supporting organizations who self-identify as ready to make needed structural and institutional change in order to engage and retain a more diverse population of staff and participants, we can begin to shift organizational culture--policies, procedures and practices--that all too often go unchanged in the midst of unsuccessful diversity initiatives. The Foundation for Youth Investment is committed to leading the movement towards creating more equitable opportunities for people of all backgrounds; and it is our firm belief that these programs will do exactly that.



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