



An Evaluation of the Outdoor Educators Institute

Advancing Equity & Inclusion in the Outdoor Field

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Prepared for
Youth Outside

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INFORMING 
CHANGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Outside strives to ensure that the lived experience of all youth is honored as part of the outdoor experience. In 2012, Youth Outside began the Outdoor Educators Institute (OEI) as a development program to empower young adults (ages 18–24) from underrepresented communities as outdoor leaders, and to foster greater inclusion and culturally relevant leadership within the outdoor education, recreation, and environmental field. Working in collaboration with outdoor programming partners, OEI offers nature-based training that emphasizes cultural relevancy and equity alongside technical outdoor skills. The three-month evening and weekend program provides training in expedition planning, orienteering, kayaking, natural history, and mountaineering. Training sessions also explore barriers to access faced by underrepresented youth, how power and privilege operate in outdoor programs, and practical steps that guides and program leaders can take to promote inclusion and participation. This attention to supporting participants to understand and address the deeper challenges of bringing outdoor education to underrepresented communities sets OEI apart.

In 2017, Informing Change conducted an evaluation of OEI to explore its impact on equity in outdoor leadership and employment, and inclusive outdoor programming and operations. Findings indicate that OEI has successfully increased outdoor and leadership skills and comfort among the racially, ethnically, gender, income, and sexually diverse group of trainees and graduates. Salient strengths of the program include:

Training and Curriculum: The unique OEI curriculum seamlessly integrates discussion of cultural relevancy, equity, and inclusion into quality outdoor training and youth leadership skills development. Discussions around race, ethnicity, income, and other equity concerns were overwhelmingly viewed as beneficial by trainees, graduates, and partners. They stated that this unique aspect of the program is a key to fostering and sustaining inclusive programming.

96% of graduates agree that outdoor and cultural relevancy trainings prepared them for outdoor employment.

Network Building: OEI is in a unique position to influence the field by fostering effective professional, field, alumni, and personal networks. Graduates and partners were particularly keen to see these networking opportunities expanded and strengthened to help them identify ongoing opportunities for employment, to foster a peer support and learning community, and to generate new approaches to inclusive programming and engagement.

94% of trainees found new ways to get involved in outdoor education.

Organizational Support: Partners report improved capacity to recruit and appropriately engage underrepresented youth and communities as a result of the influence of OEI graduates who go on to work in their organizations. The guidance that OEI offers to partners is particularly important for helping them strengthen their practices and operations to promote equity and inclusion in their work and service to youth.

100% of partners increased staff capacity for culturally inclusive programming.

There are several ways OEI can strengthen and expand on the impact of its work.

- Trainees, graduates, and partners agree that **optional or additional trainings and longer excursions** during or after program participation may strengthen employment preparedness among graduates.
- Given its unique position with outdoor programs, and particularly outdoor organizations that are committed to equity, inclusion, and cultural relevancy, OEI may be able to **catalyze and guide more expansive network building** as a way to impact the field more broadly.

- OEI can continue to **foster structural and field changes** that will facilitate more inclusive and culturally relevant leadership by providing a curriculum that can be replicated and adapted beyond current OEI geographic areas, and by training OEI graduates to be ambassadors of the OEI model.
- OEI can **increase its role as an employment pathway for graduates** by facilitating employer-graduate matching and by assisting employers in acquiring resources needed to create employment opportunities that are adequately funded and appropriately structured for graduates seeking full-time positions.

44% of graduates work in the outdoor field.

INTRODUCTION

Youth Outside envisions a day when all youth have equitable access to the positive benefits of meaningful outdoor experiences and the opportunity to be champions of our planet. Through grantmaking, capacity-building, and training, Youth Outside promotes healthy lives and strives to ensure that the lived experiences of all youth are honored as part of the outdoor experience.

Youth Outside

In 2006, the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council (Stewardship Council) created a Youth Investment Program to support outdoor and environmental programming for youth. Realizing the importance of this work, the Foundation for Youth Investment (FYI) was established as its own entity in 2010, having been granted approximately \$10.7 million from the Stewardship Council.

In the Fall of 2015, FYI officially changed its name to Youth Outside to truly reflect the heart of its work: connecting youth to nature by eliminating barriers, providing resources, and promoting outdoor education and programming as essential tools that can improve health and academic achievement, teach teamwork and problem-solving skills, prepare youth for the workforce, and inspire future stewards of our planet.

Since 2015, Youth Outside has provided meaningful outdoor experiences for over 15,000 underrepresented youth from northern and central California. Youth Outside is also a regional and national leader on equity in the outdoors. The organization is committed to advancing underrepresented leaders in the outdoor field and to creating inclusive environments that authentically welcome and engage all people in relevant ways.

The Outdoor Educators Institute (OEI)

The Outdoor Educators Institute (OEI), a development program for young adults (ages 18–24), aims to foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant leadership in the outdoor field by engaging racially and socially diverse youth from economically challenged communities. Founded by Youth Outside in 2012, OEI challenges inequity and exclusion by supporting young leaders and partnering organizations to shift their institutional culture and operations, better engage youth from all walks of life, and expand opportunities for underrepresented youth—particularly those facing historical and systemic barriers to access—to identify and connect with leaders in outdoor education programs.

With support from partner organizations,¹ OEI provides young adults a variety of outdoor skills and professional development trainings to create a pathway to employment within the outdoor field. In the fall of 2015, Youth Outside made a strategic decision to shift the OEI model in three key ways. First, OEI changed from a 10-week intensive program to a three-month evening and weekend program, making the program a more accessible and viable option for the broader community, including those who have struggled to access training opportunities. This shift was intentionally designed to reflect Youth Outside's commitment to cultural relevancy, equity, and inclusion. Secondly, Youth Outside began providing feedback to partner organizations about the experiences being created for OEI participants, allowing partners to learn and grow along with each year's cohort. Lastly, Youth Outside began more intentional recruitment of participants and partners. This included explicitly presenting OEI as a program that recruits participants of color who believe that their identity is an integral part of the outdoor experience.

¹ In this report, partner organization refers to an organization working with OEI to deliver programming to OEI trainees. Other organizations in the outdoor education and education field that do not work with OEI in some capacity are referred to as outdoor employers.

Within the OEI model, partner organizations provide leadership opportunities for trainees and, with support from OEI, are encouraged to establish viable pathways for employment for OEI graduates. Several outdoor organizations have served as partner organizations with OEI over the years, from government agencies such as the National Parks Service to nonprofits such as NatureBridge and other programs like Pacific Leadership Institute. Partners are based in the Bay Area, and most provide services to young adults and youth of color from underrepresented communities. Although the number of youth served annually by these partner organizations varies widely, from as little as 300 to as many as 30,000, all partner organizations share many of the same values as OEI, and have missions that align with OEI's work to expand access to the outdoors for those who have been traditionally excluded.

Discussions and trainings with OEI trainees and ongoing engagement between partners and OEI staff, trainees, and graduates are intended to stimulate and expand inclusive outdoor programming.

The OEI Evaluation

Youth Outside defines cultural relevancy as effectively reaching and engaging communities and their youth in a manner that is 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.² We, Informing Change (Berkeley, CA), served as the strategic learning partner to Youth Outside. In 2017 we conducted an evaluation of OEI, the results of which we present in this report. Through this evaluation, we explored the contributions and impacts of OEI on culturally relevant leadership and programming. Specifically, we describe what works and areas to strengthen and sustain the program with respect to:

- **Equity in outdoor leadership and employment**—pathways to outdoor employment and other leadership opportunities for the broader community of young adults, particularly those from groups underrepresented in current outdoor leadership.
- **Inclusive outdoor programming and operations**—the adoption of and commitment to effective and culturally relevant programming, values, and operations within organizations and among practitioners that improve engagement opportunities for underrepresented youth and communities.

Data collection for the mixed methods evaluation was conducted between June 2017 and January 2018. We present evidence from (a) questionnaires administered to OEI Cohort 2017 before and after the training (n=19) to explore gains in skills, leadership development, and perspectives on the program; (b) questionnaires (n=10) and interviews (n=10) with a sample of graduates from recent cohorts to explore employment outcomes and program contributions; (c) feedback questionnaires (n=8) and interviews (n=4) with key OEI partner outdoor organizations to explore the effectiveness of the partnership on programming, operations, and organizational leadership; and (d) a focus group with OEI leadership at Youth Outside to explore strategic reflection on feedback from trainees, graduates, and partners and to examine future directions.

EQUITY IN OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYMENT

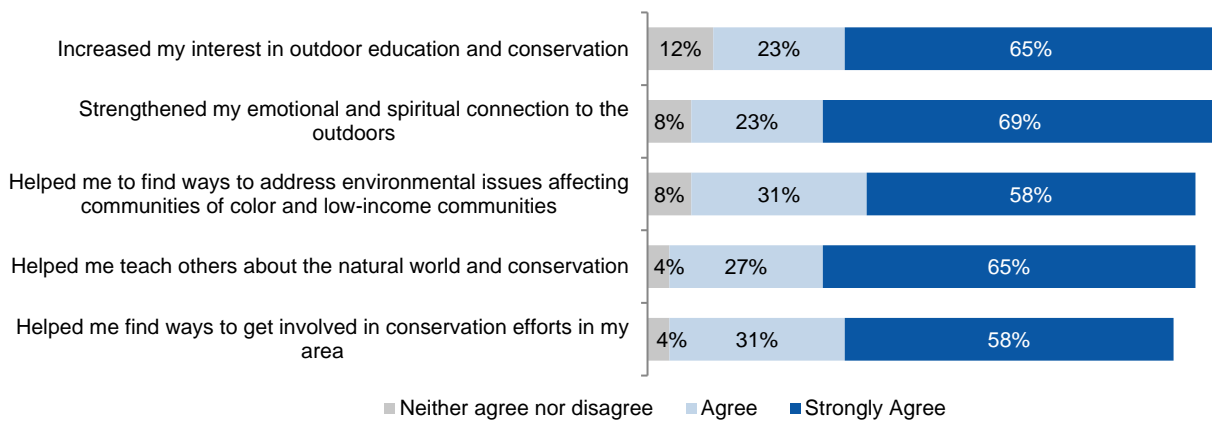
Trainees, graduates, and partners report that OEI prepares young adults from diverse backgrounds to be outdoor leaders by strengthening their **connections to the outdoors**, expanding their **outdoor and leadership skills**, and preparing graduates for **employment** in the sector. Nevertheless, the need remains to address structural and organizational conditions (e.g., the nature and quality of available positions, hiring practices, etc.) that limit pathways to employment.

² <http://www.youthoutside.org/programs/cultural-relevancy-series>

Impact on Outdoor Connection

At the beginning of the OEI program, many trainees reported taking action in their personal lives to help the environment, such as recycling, taking public transportation, or talking to others about the environment. Still, OEI programming strengthened participants' connections to the outdoors: almost all trainees and graduates agree that OEI increased their connection to the outdoors and interest in outdoor education and conservation. Most trainees and graduates also reported that OEI helped them find ways to get involved in conservation efforts, address environmental issues that affect communities of color and low-income communities, and teach others about the natural world (Exhibit 1). Several graduates indicated that their employment includes environmental stewardship activities or that they currently work as outdoor guides or educators for youth in addition to their primary employment.

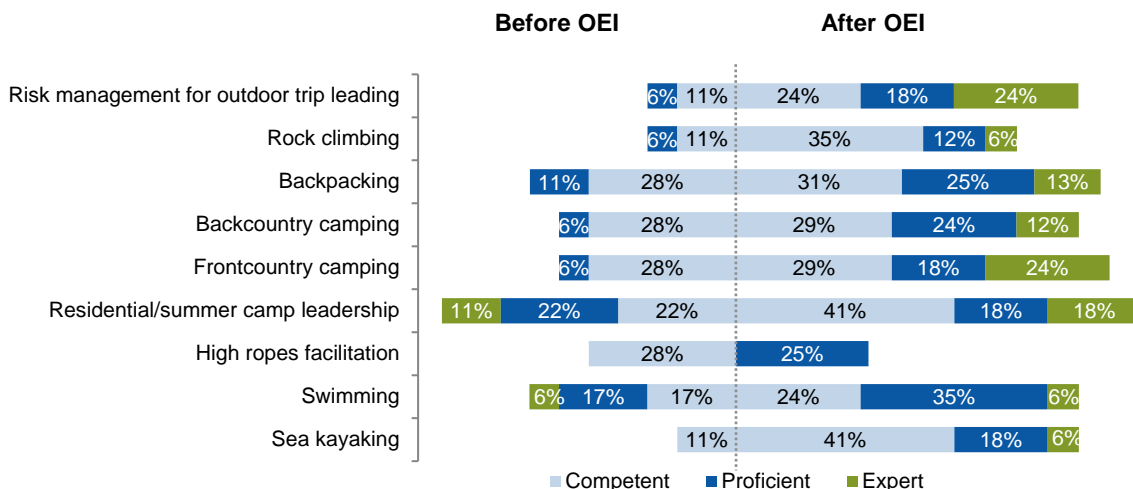
Exhibit 1
Participating in OEI strengthened outdoor connections for trainees and graduates.



Impact on Outdoor Skills

OEI provides trainees with the tangible outdoor skills needed to facilitate outdoor experiences for youth. All trainees were highly satisfied with OEI's outdoor skills training, and reported considerable gains in those skills, most notably in risk management, rock climbing, backpacking, sea kayaking, and camping (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
Trainees reported considerable gains in outdoor skills.



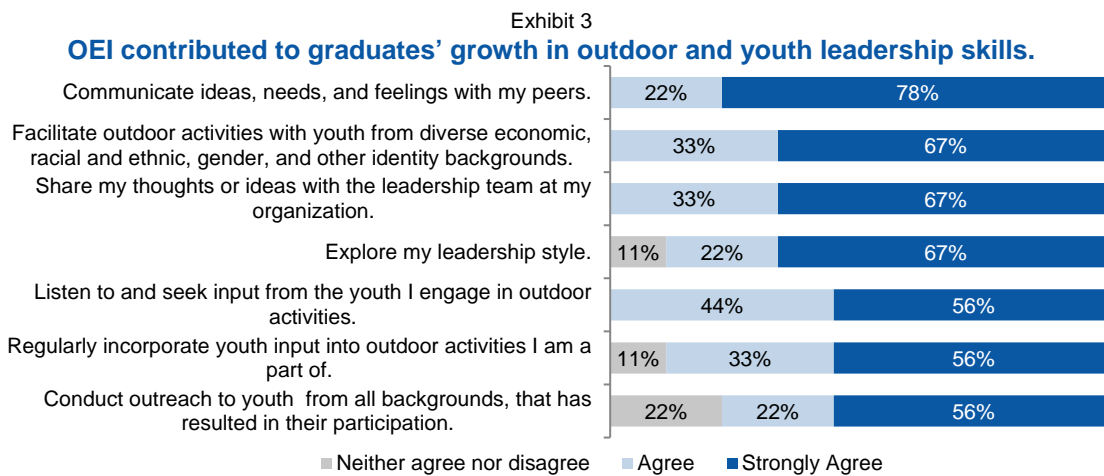
OEI graduates similarly note the benefits of outdoor skills trainings. Seventy-eight percent of graduates surveyed indicated that these trainings contributed “a lot” to their professional growth. During interviews, several graduates also indicated that the Wilderness First Aid (WFA) training and certification they received through OEI was valuable in particular, and that it contributed to their employability in the outdoor industry.

“The program gave me amazing connections and hands-on experience. I went hiking and backpacking for the first time and didn’t have to pay for those things.”

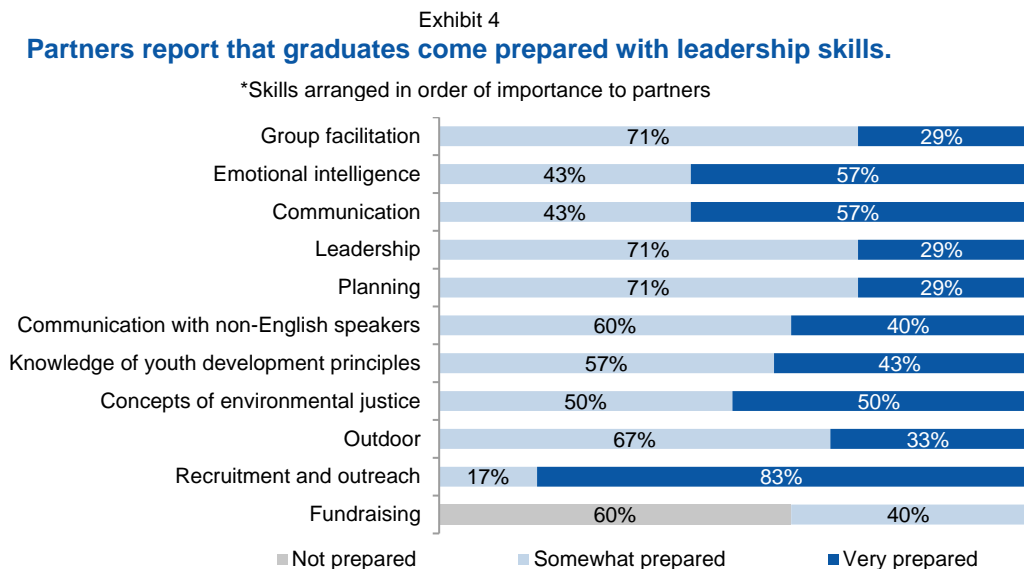
– OEI Graduate

Impact on Leadership Skills

Graduates reported strong gains in their leadership skills through OEI. The program empowered graduates to be better communicators, facilitators, and leaders, and better able to engage with youth in outdoor activities (Exhibit 3).



Partners agree that OEI graduates have the leadership skills needed for positions in the outdoor and recreation field. Partners report that OEI graduates are well-prepared in the leadership skills deemed important when considering new employees—notably, emotional intelligence, strong group facilitation, and communication (Exhibit 4). One partner proudly noted that OEI graduates they hired have become leaders at their organization.



Impact on Outdoor Employment

Since its launch in 2012, OEI has facilitated six cohorts and served 59 young adults from communities that have been historically underrepresented in the outdoor field. Most trainees arrive in the program with limited prior experience in the outdoor education and recreation field, often times as high school participants or college aged interns. In the 2017 cohort, four out of five trainees either were currently working in the outdoor education and recreation field, or had worked in the field prior to starting OEI. Upon completion of OEI, 44% of trainees indicated that they were currently working in the outdoor field, although almost all trainees and graduates agreed that OEI inspired them to consider a career in the outdoor field (94% of trainees, 78% of graduates) and helped them find new ways to get involved in outdoor education (94% of trainees, 100% of graduates). Among the OEI graduates surveyed, two-thirds were currently working, interning, or volunteering in the outdoor education and recreation field.

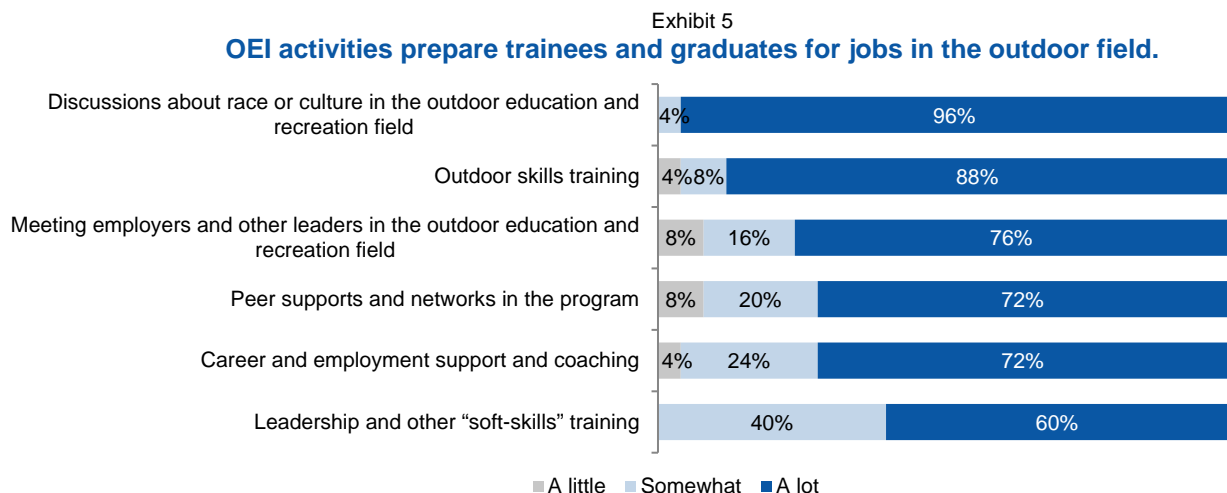
In their current places of employment, graduates report that they engage in activities such as leading outdoor trips, facilitating youth programs, teaching classes for youth, designing organizational communication strategies, and evaluating program curricula. Graduates have shared their knowledge and experience through other venues, as well: over half of graduates who we surveyed (56%) have written or conducted presentations about outdoor education and recreation since completing OEI.

“OEI gave me the tools to go out and be a great candidate in terms of the outdoor field, and tools to better market myself. I also have the network to contact people I knew through OEI as peers or partners. OEI boosted my confidence around skills, and gave me confidence personally in my development as an adult, as a young person, and as someone part of greater community.”

– OEI Graduate

OEI’s career support and preparation offerings are a clear strength of the program from the trainees’ perspective. Almost all trainees (88%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the career and employment support and coaching provided by OEI and 94% were satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunities OEI provided to meet employers and other leaders in the outdoor education and recreation field.

Most trainees and graduates reported that a number of training, discussion, and networking activities facilitated by OEI contributed a lot to their preparedness. This was especially true with respect to both the cultural relevance discussions about race and culture in the outdoor field, and the tactical outdoor skill trainings (Exhibit 5).



When it comes to securing employment, about four out of five trainees (71%) and graduates (78%) agree or strongly agree that OEI helped them find employment in the outdoor education and recreation field. During interviews, graduates reported that they have tapped into the network of cohort peers and outdoor organization contacts that they built through OEI, both when seeking employment opportunities and when seeking opportunities to partner with other outdoor agencies in their work.

Strengthening Equity in Outdoor Leadership and Employment

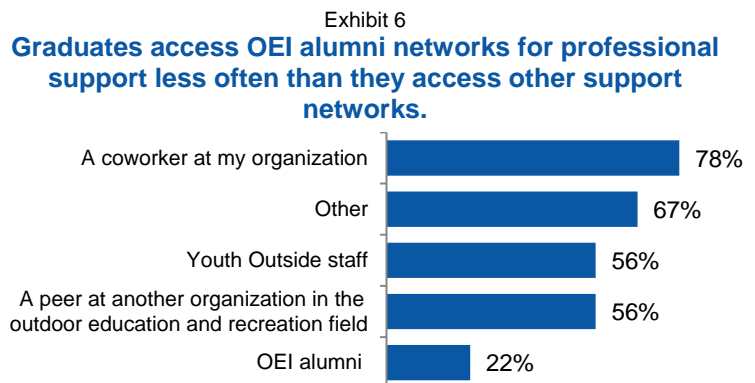
When asked in interviews what would help further their goals, graduates shared that further outdoor trainings and certifications would be beneficial, either to dive deeper into skills introduced in the program, or to refresh skills that graduates did not have an opportunity to further practice and refine after the initial training session.

Partners also suggested that the OEI model could be strengthened by more ongoing and extended opportunities to build and improve upon an array of outdoor skills. These partners mentioned that longer leadership expeditions could enhance employment potential for some trainees. They acknowledged, however, that it is easier to teach those hard skills than to teach soft skills such as cultural relevancy or leadership. Additionally, OEI leadership noted that graduates experienced challenges finding successful employment in the outdoor field even after the earlier 10-week intensive training, which included a 14-day backpacking trip and 10-day sea-kayaking expedition. In similar statements to those made by partners, OEI leadership noted that these longer expeditions, while beneficial to trainees for skill development, do not distinguish successful applicants from others.

“We are not necessarily looking for folks that spend hundreds of nights outdoors every year, because that doesn’t represent students, but we are looking for folks with solid personal comfort.”

– OEI Partner

In their current work, graduates tap into coworkers, Youth Outside staff, and peers at other outdoor organizations for professional support (Exhibit 6). While graduates indicated in interviews that they valued their cohort of OEI peers both personally and professionally, few alumni survey respondents reported that they go to other alumni for professional support. This may present an opportunity for OEI to better formalize an OEI alumni network to provide natural touchpoints for professional support, sustain shared learning and ongoing growth, and strengthen the OEI brand. In interviews, graduates suggested that OEI could improve its leverage of online media such as LinkedIn and Facebook for communications.



Employment pathways remain an area for growth, but may also require further changes and shifts in mindset within the field. All partners interviewed mentioned that the main barrier to employing OEI graduates at their organization was the types of positions available and their accessibility and appropriateness for OEI graduates. Many outdoor positions are volunteer, seasonal, or part-time, and do not offer competitive salaries or benefits sufficient for the Bay Area’s high cost of living. Additionally, partners have very little turnover regarding their full-time positions, some of which are more administrative in nature. One partner noted that the outdoor positions available at their organization involve trips away from the Bay Area that may take leaders away from their families or other commitments for long periods of time. Lastly, and perhaps not often talked about, is the field’s inability to

navigate hiring undocumented young adults. One partner shared that hiring undocumented individuals is a challenge for their organization.

“First of all we rely heavily on volunteers for field programs which is somewhat unique for outdoor organizations, and we rely heavily on seasonal positions. In many cases that is not something that people are looking for when they are starting out in this field or wanting to create a path for themselves.”

– OEI Partner

INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING AND OPERATIONS

Trainees, graduates, and partners report that OEI has been influential in improving **inclusive engagement** and in strengthening and expanding **inclusive practices and operations** in organizations where trainees and graduates work. OEI can continue to foster these gains by facilitating opportunities for graduates and partners to engage with members of the networks they develop through OEI. Findings suggest that improving inclusive programming more broadly may be impacted by the adoption of the OEI model and cultural relevancy curriculum at organizations outside of their current partner pool and region.

Impact on Inclusive Engagement

Prior to their participation in OEI, over half of trainees in the 2017 cohort indicated that they were currently working with youth of color (61%) or youth from low-income communities (56%), the majority of which resided in the trainees' own neighborhoods in the East Bay or San Francisco. Similarly, only one-half to two-thirds of trainees had experience regularly incorporating youth input into outdoor activities (67% agree or strongly agree) and facilitating outdoor activities with youth from diverse backgrounds (59% agree or strongly agree). Many trainees enter the program because of an interest in and commitment to inclusive and culturally relevant outdoor engagement.

“I am currently focused on accessibility and identity as it relates to the environment. I want to create safe spaces for youth to express themselves fully and feel connected to their surroundings and communities.”

– OEI Trainee

“It is important to me for youth to know and understand that no matter what they are, where they come from, or what they look like, there is always space for them in the outdoors. The outdoors should be inclusive of everyone!”

– OEI Trainee

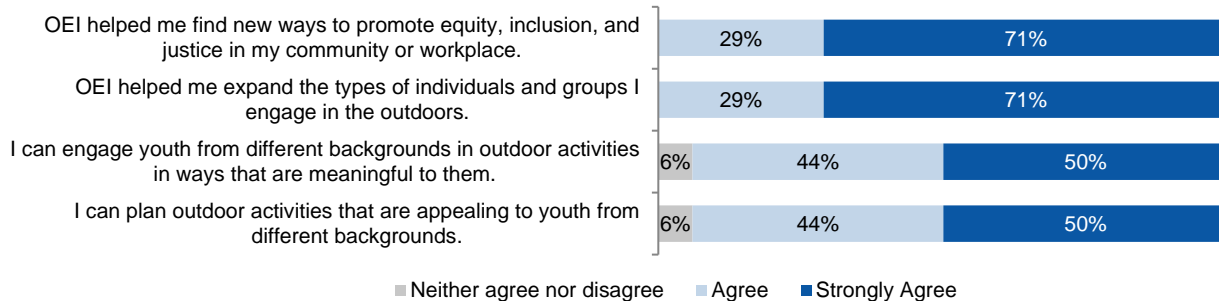
OEI is intentionally marketed to draw trainees from historically underrepresented backgrounds. OEI leadership reported that with the shift in the model design, staff began to “talk of it more in terms of being at the intersection of social justice and the outdoors, or identity and the outdoors.” While still reaching persons interested in working in the outdoors, the shift in language and marketing resulted in even greater interest among those wanting to work with an intersectional focus.

“More and more, we get folks who are interested in being thoughtful about the intersection of their identities in the outdoors and representation in the outdoors”

– OEI Leadership

At program completion, trainees reported that OEI helped them expand the types of individuals and groups they engage in the outdoors and promote equity, inclusion, and justice in the workplace. They also report being prepared to lead activities for a variety of youth in appealing and culturally relevant ways (Exhibit 7), and emphasized that cultural relevancy is very important to the work they want to do after OEI. At least four out of five trainees reported that they intend to lead outdoor activities with low-income communities (88%) and with youth of color (82%). Trainees also reported strong abilities to engage youth and promote inclusion in the outdoors.

Exhibit 7
Upon completing OEI, trainees report culturally relevant leadership skills.



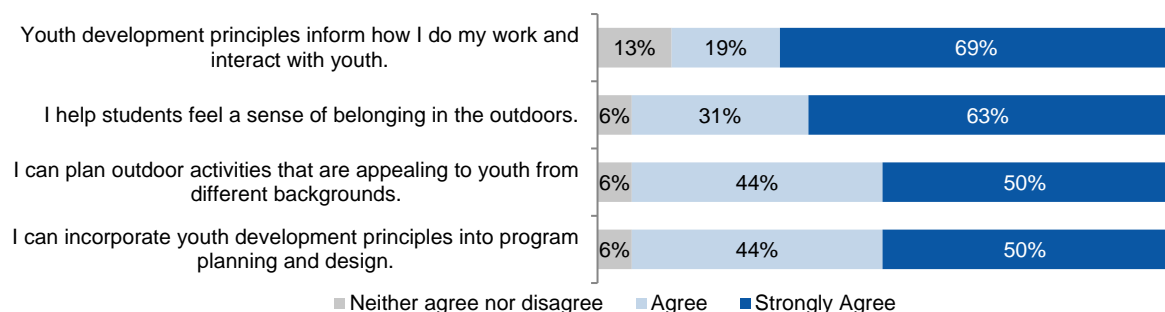
All graduates indicated that they have worked with youth of color and with low-income communities in the outdoors since completing OEI. Additionally, 89% of graduates report that since OEI, they have worked to make an existing outdoor education or recreation program more inclusive, and two-thirds have changed the way an organization they work or volunteer with designs programs for youth. Seven out of nine alumni survey respondents reported that they employ or address cultural relevance in their current work, volunteering, or internship activities. In descriptions of how cultural relevancy is important to their work, graduates described utilizing culturally relevant practices both when engaging with diverse or underrepresented communities, and when engaging as people of color with majority white communities.

“OEI gave me a language around cultural relevancy in the outdoor and environmental sector. It gave me better communication tools and skills for articulating my personal mission and work, and helped me seek out other organizations that are similarly aligned.”

– OEI Graduate

In interviews, almost all graduates stated that they currently address issues of equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance in the outdoors (90%). Graduates were unequivocal in their praise of OEI’s trainings and discussions on equity and inclusion, and six out of ten graduates reported that OEI helped them to develop a language and

Exhibit 8
Upon completing OEI, trainees understand how to incorporate youth development principles into outdoor activities.



approach around incorporating cultural relevancy into their work. OEI prepares graduates to be culturally relevant leaders with the skills to create more inclusive and equitable outdoor experiences for youth (Exhibit 8).

“This past year I worked for an organization that was majority white, lived in a small town that is majority white, and found support in a community of peers and other educators that are majority white, while serving youth from communities of color. Cultural relevancy was lacking—some of the instructors had never worked with marginalized communities, we had no curriculum highlighting the Native American lands we used, and there was the notion that instructors needed to be more firm and discipline the marginalized youth, assuming they were going to be troublemakers and difficult to handle. How unfair that was: to stereotype and judge those groups before even getting the opportunity to meet them. Without cultural relevancy, a lack of compassion and understanding will continue to support the system that oppresses these communities.”

– OEI Graduate

Through partnership with OEI, partners reported that they receive the benefit of having access to qualified candidates who are well-versed in culturally relevant leadership. Partners reported that OEI graduates are aware of the ways culture and personal experiences can influence a person’s relationship to the outdoors, and that they bring this knowledge to the work that they do, making graduates better able to connect with youth that traditionally have not had access to the outdoors. Partners also feel that working with OEI staff, trainees, and graduates helps them identify opportunities to engage youth from all backgrounds.

“OEI alumni that we have hired in different capacities just have really great leadership skills, are really connected to communities that they are serving through work with us, and are able to develop good rapport and trust with people they are leading and guiding. OEI alumni are able to understand the cultural background and beliefs and fears and concerns that these participants might be bringing with them to an outdoor experience, and that makes them really valuable. The other advantage is that participants are interacting with leaders that they can connect with and that look like them and that they can identify with. That puts them at ease and helps them to imagine that this is something that they could potentially do themselves.”

– OEI Partner

Impact on Inclusive Operations

OEI’s cultural relevancy focus and training has benefited organizations directly through partnerships and indirectly through the work of OEI trainees and graduates. Partners working with OEI are able to successfully engage diverse youth and communities (Exhibit 9). All partners described the learning aspect that comes along with serving as an OEI partner. Partners are not only given the space to share their expertise with program participants, but they also have the opportunity to learn from OEI staff and the program participants themselves. Partners discussed exposing other organization staff to concepts of social justice and cultural relevancy through their work with OEI. These learnings lead to better-informed internal hiring practices, staff that are more aware of the role ethnic culture, along with a community’s history and access to resources, plays in outdoor experiences, and improved programming for the youth they serve.

OEI staff facilitate additional learning through participant feedback. All of the partners interviewed for this evaluation expressed the value of the participant feedback they receive at the end of the program. Partners note that this feedback helps them improve future OEI trainings and also informs other work happening at the organization. Partners feel that their work with OEI provides an opportunity to learn more about cultural relevancy and environmental justice, share these learnings with other staff, and improve youth programming.

Trainees reported limited to no change, and some declines, in applying their leadership skills to their workplaces at the end of the program period (Exhibit

10). Nearly half of trainees reported working in sectors outside of the outdoor field at the end of the program. These settings may have limited opportunities for trainees to fully exercise the leadership skills they develop over the course of the program. Related, as trainees gain more comfort integrating cultural relevancy into their leadership style, by the end of the program they may reassess the opportunities for them to exercise culturally relevant leadership. Future evaluations of OEI may want to explore factors that influence opportunities for trainees and graduates to apply their culturally relevant leadership skills in diverse workplace settings within and outside of the outdoor field.

Exhibit 9
OEI Partners report high levels of success providing inclusive engagement and activities to communities and staff.

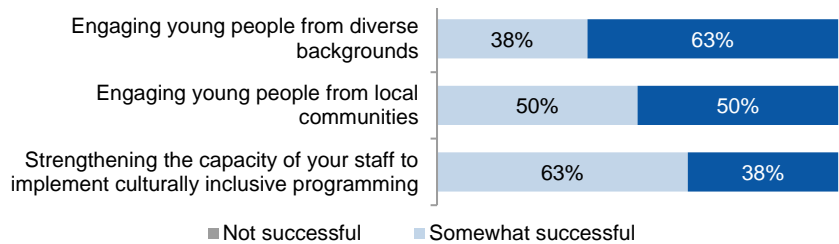
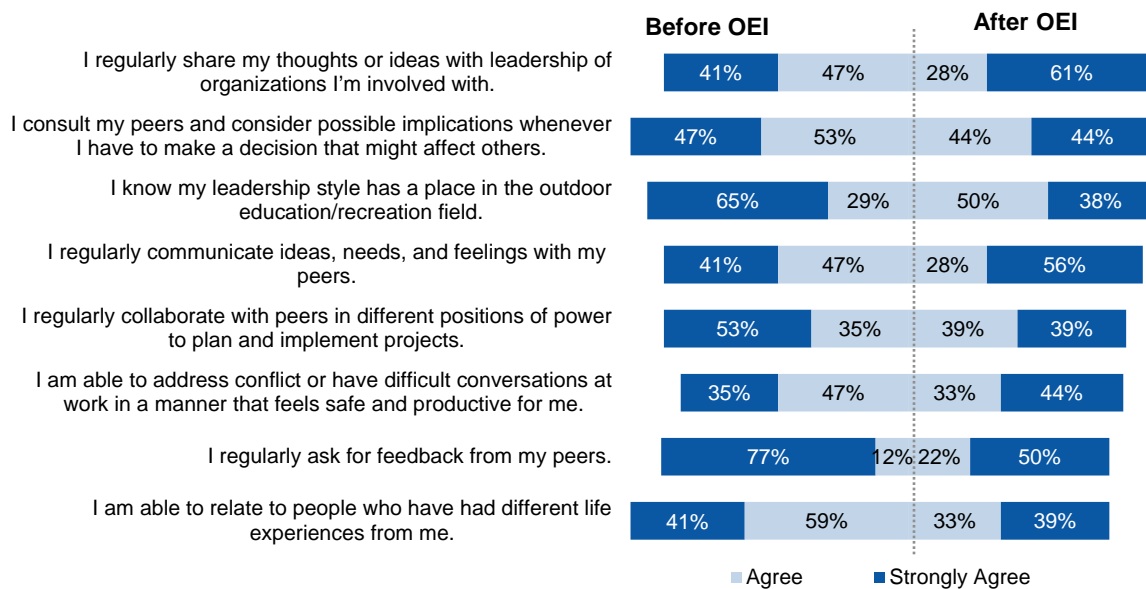


Exhibit 10
There is a need for more leadership experiences and opportunities in trainees' workplaces.



Impact on Partner Capacity

Partnership with OEI benefits outdoor organizations' visibility, outreach, and resources. Partners mentioned the importance of being associated with Youth Outside's name and their work, and how this also contributes to increased visibility for their organization. Some smaller organizations stated that the partnership brings them into the spotlight, providing a platform for them to network with other organizations they may not usually work with or have access to.

Partners report varying levels of success leveraging their partnership with OEI to increase the resources available for their work with local communities (Exhibit 11). Survey and interview findings suggest that outdoor organizations could benefit from additional resources to sustain their broader operations and commitments to inclusive practices. Particularly, partners highlighted the need for additional resources for ongoing support with staff salaries to meet the high Bay Area costs of living, and for outreach to low-income communities and communities of color.

Exhibit 11

OEI partners report high levels of operational success, but lower success attaining adequate resources and supports for communities and staff.



Strengthening Inclusive Programming

Sustained networking opportunities are among the most common recommendations from trainees, graduates, and partners. For trainees and graduates, networking with peers and partner organizations is an essential component of trainee satisfaction and success. Networking opportunities with partner organizations broaden trainees’ knowledge of the landscape of outdoor education and recreation organizations and aid graduates searching for employment opportunities. Trainees also find continual value in their cohort of peers, which they tap into for personal and professional support during and after OEI.

OEI Partners value working with Youth Outside and want more opportunities to network with other OEI partners and environmental organizations. OEI graduates have also connected partner organizations with organizations they know or work with. Although some partners have been able to take advantage of this and connect with other organizations, partners would like to see a more structured approach to networking to facilitate collaboration within and outside of their work with OEI. OEI Partners also recognize the importance of working with a partner whose values align with their own organization’s beliefs and who helps further their organization’s mission. Partnerships give organizations the ability to help support and develop the kind of outdoor leaders they want to see in the outdoor and recreation field and in their organizations.

SUSTAINING AND ENHANCING THE OEI MODEL

The value that OEI provides to trainees and partners is cemented, in part, through its program structure. The following elements, identified from information gathered for this evaluation, help create a great program experience for both parties and should be retained in any future replications of the program model.

Networking opportunities with partner organizations broaden trainees’ knowledge of the landscape of outdoor education and recreation organizations and aid graduates when searching for employment opportunities. Trainees

also find continual value in their cohort of peers, which they tap into for personal and professional support during and after OEI. **Weekend trainings** provide a better fit for participants in the program, and the **leadership and soft skills trainings** are preparing OEI graduates well and strengthening the types of skills partners look for in staff for their organization. The **partnerships** not only give organizations the ability to help support and develop outdoor leaders, but they also provide organizations with an opportunity to learn more about cultural relevancy and social justice and bring those learnings to their programs and staff.

We describe below areas that trainees, graduates, partners, and OEI leadership discussed as opportunities to build on what works to strengthen and sustain the OEI model.

Resources

Partners report varying levels of success leveraging their partnership with OEI to increase the resources available for their work with local communities. Where possible OEI may explore ways to provide ongoing assistance to outdoor organizations seeking to access available resources to sustain inclusive programming, staffing, and outreach to members of low-income communities and communities of color. This assistance may include guidance, referral resources, and capacity building, as well as access to collaborative or mutually beneficial networks of OEI-affiliated outdoor organizations.

During interviews, graduates frequently cited the Program Manager as an ongoing resource and mentor to them for professional support after OEI, helping them identify employment opportunities, create high-impact resumes, and find potential resources for trainings and certifications of interest. Nevertheless, it is challenging for one person to sustain this role. Peer networks have been recommended as effective but underutilized sources of support for graduates. Finding ways to sustain these networks for social, emotional, technical, and professional supports may increase employment outcomes for young adults and help graduates identify new and innovative opportunities to disseminate the OEI model, values, and message in the communities and organizations they engage after the program.

OEI graduates are also important to sustaining program operations. Graduates are engaged as program assistants to observe, contribute to, and lead discussions in an effort to provide ongoing opportunities for them to enhance their culturally relevant leadership skills. According to OEI leadership, graduates are particularly important to sustaining a focus on culturally relevant and inclusive programming in the outdoor field. In particular, many of the young adults who join OEI develop their “profound knowledge around the implications of what it means not to be a part of the mainstream in a field that says it can’t figure out how to get everybody involved,” as one member of the OEI leadership team expressed.

“Alumni are the future of this work, and the present of this work, particularly in other parts of the country and other regions.”

– OEI Leadership

Pathways

Partners and graduates provided thoughts on potential opportunities to strengthen pathways to employment in the outdoor field. As mentioned earlier, most graduates and partners would like to see expanded opportunities for ongoing and advanced trainings and certifications. In addition, some partners suggested that trainees would benefit from the leadership- and skill-building opportunities that only longer expeditions (>3 days) can provide, especially to prepare for employment positions where longer expeditions are common. The challenge for the OEI model is to balance exposure to longer expeditions with the lived contexts of the young adults who are essential to program success and shifting the field. Some of this may require organizations themselves to take up exposure and training of new staff for longer expeditions. Indeed, partners noted that outdoor skills can be taught and

eventually developed within partner organizations in a way that culturally relevant leadership, communication skills, and youth development knowledge cannot.

Partners request ongoing support in recruiting and hiring OEI graduates as well as support in encouraging and engaging graduates to volunteer at organizations. However, as noted earlier, the structure of employment positions (e.g., seasonal, part-time, lower salary, etc.) do not often meet the needs of graduates who may not have access to financial supports and cushions to accept these types of positions. OEI might provide resources or guidance to help partners and other outdoor organizations develop innovative employment structures that meet the needs of young leaders from all backgrounds and economic circumstances.

“If we really want to create an environment and a field that is attractive to more people, then it has to be a more sustainable opportunity. The field as a whole has to rethink the structure of seasonal, part-time, and unbenefited employment.”

– OEI Leadership

Processes

Partners noted a few areas where OEI processes might be improved to make for an even more effective collaboration. One partner recommended changing the proposal process to create a longer contract (e.g., three years) that does not have to be renewed on an annual basis, particularly for organizations with a track record of effective partnering. All partners stated that timely communication was a challenge. They suggested that conducting partner selection and notifying organizations that they have been selected should happen earlier in the year to help partners better coordinate and plan for trips.

Partners would like more information on program trainees as well. They note that they would like to receive feedback from trainees and others about their organization and the activities they conduct significantly earlier in their engagements to help them understand what is working and to make course corrections where needed. Some partners would like more information about trainings led by other partners and by OEI in order to improve their own trainings and to make sure their programming aligns well with the rest of the curriculum (e.g., partners could refer to an OEI reading or discussion to tie together the content of the two lessons). One partner, whose training was attended by only half of the expected participants, suggested that OEI could better encourage event attendance.

“This year, we had several people self-identifying as fat, and so talking about ableism in the outdoors became more and more of an issue. Talking about fat phobia in the outdoors became more and more of a point of conversation. And so for us to maintain relevancy, it’s also not as simple as building a stellar curriculum and passing it on from year to year.”

– OEI Leadership

Establishing a set curriculum faces challenges since the topics covered and the depth of coverage may vary across years in order to be responsive to cohort trainees. Nevertheless, OEI is currently developing a playbook of activities and guidelines for running these trainings, which can be useful to partners as well as to graduates serving as future leaders of OEI or related programs.

Changes to the Field

As mentioned earlier, partners we interviewed report that they have made organizational changes to better reflect their commitments to culturally relevant programming. The supports that Youth Outside can provide through in-house programs like their Cultural Relevancy series, trainings, and other supports and counseling work are an area to further explore in helping OEI and partners effect change in the field. As OEI leadership discussed, OEI and Youth Outside are exploring opportunities to expand their guidance on how and where organizations need to address policies, procedures, hiring practices, and other organizational barriers to culturally relevant programming and systems-level changes.

“If all the organizations that come through our doors are increasingly committing to actual systems-level changes, then as a collective, I believe we’re chipping away at that system and structured change within the field as a whole.”

– OEI Leadership

Financial Sustainability

OEI’s current goal is to be 100% funded, annually, by 2020. Within their current scope of activities, they are beginning to approach this level. As noted, however, partners, trainees, and graduates noted several ways they would like to see the OEI model expanded or enhanced. Implementing these options would require additional financial resources for the program. Sustaining networking opportunities, expanding employment supports and opportunities, increasing access to trainings and certifications, and fostering collective and systems-level coordination and change within outdoor organizations will require additional resources.

In addition to pursuing opportunities to sustain a 100% funded level, OEI is currently aiming to explore and expand service opportunities. Whereas personnel costs represent 30% of OEI’s annual budget, partner fees make up half of all costs. One way they are seeking to reduce expenses for the long-term sustainability of the program is by finding ways to reduce partner fees or to have these fees underwritten by an outside funder. They are also exploring opportunities, like pursuing funding to purchase a program vehicle, which would build organizational capacity to transport participants, while also reducing program costs for the future. An option OEI is considering that may reduce personnel costs for the program and strengthen graduate preparation for employment is the creation of a group of professional volunteers to provide mentorship and career support for participants during and after the program. Other opportunities OEI is pursuing to reach its funding goal include increasing contributions to and exploring marketing opportunities.

“If we can improve how we are making a case about OEI, not just to funders, but also to peer organizations and partners, our individual networks, audiences at field-level conferences, etc., we will be helping to increase awareness of the program, its distinction, and value.”

– OEI Leadership

CONCLUSION

OEI demonstrates considerable success achieving its aims of fostering inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant leadership in the outdoor field. Trainees, graduates, and partners significantly benefit from the integration of cultural relevancy, youth development, leadership, and outdoor skill-building into the 3-month course. Network building and career supports are key components of the OEI model that contribute to graduates’ future success and engagement in the outdoor field.

Future enhancements to the OEI model may include the addition of optional and ongoing opportunities for advanced training and longer excursions; facilitating networks of outdoor organizations and OEI graduates, and supporting these networks in disseminating OEI principles and practices into the broader field; and enhancing employment pathways by providing guidance to employers on structuring and sustaining appropriate career opportunities, and by linking graduates to these opportunities.

As Youth Outside continues to train and empower an ever-growing number of underrepresented leaders through OEI, and works to ensure that they are supported by employers in the environmental field to include all youth in outdoor programs, the organization has the opportunity to help drive broader cultural shifts towards nature-connection and equity that are so greatly needed in our communities.

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