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ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT AND EVALUATION REPORT: 2016

Submitted November 1, 2016 by Maggie Miller Consulting

INTRODUCTION:

In 2015, Cottonwood Institute (CI) began working towards its goal to re-engage Alumni and assess the long-term impact of its programs. CI organized a series of events to re-engage Alumni, focusing specifically on 21+ alumni because they were completing their college and graduate degrees and starting their careers, and CI wanted to ask them to reflect on how their experience impacted their lives years later. CI also worked with Maggie Miller Consulting (MMC) to create an online survey for alumni.ⁱ

ENGAGING ALUMNI:

In 2015, CI began reconnecting with its 21+ year old alumni by creating a Cottonwood Institute Facebook Alumni Group, which, at the time of this report, had 44 members. CI encouraged alumni to update their contact information, share contact information of CI alumni with whom they still keep in touch, and CI contracted with AlumniFinder to help update contact information of approximately 1,300 alumni.

CI engaged alumni through the following events during 2015 and 2016:

- Alumni volunteered for CI's Urban Farm Volunteer Project with Re:Vision in Denver, CO in September 2015
- Alumni Coffee-Hour at Alfalfa's in Boulder, CO in October 2015
- Alumni self-organized 2 snowshoe hikes in February and March 2016
- Alumni attended the Base Camp Bash, CI's annual fundraising event in April 2016
- Alumni Happy Hour at Under the Sun in Boulder in May 2016
- Alumni volunteered for The Throwdown, CI's annual charity cornhole tournament in August 2016
- Alumni volunteered for CI's Urban Farm Volunteer Project in September 2016

SURVEYING ALUMNI:

Maggie Miller Consulting developed an online survey to learn about **the impact of the program on Cottonwood Institute (CI) alumni**. The survey was designed to capture

information about CI's intended outcomes as described in its logic model (see attached). Thirty-three people responded to the survey.ⁱⁱ

FINDINGS:

Cottonwood Institute has a positive lasting impact on alumni.

We learned that alumni continue to...

...Explore the outdoors:

84% of survey respondents **recreate outdoors at least weekly**. They backpack, bike, camp, fish, hike, kayak, raft, run, sail, ski, snowshoe, swim, and walk.

Love hiking, camping if I can get away. Recently moved to Atlanta and have been exploring parts of the Appalachian trail

Bush walking (I live in Australia now), surfing, swimming, dancing in nature.

...Maintain or improve academic achievement, and continue education in the environmental field:

93% of respondents described **pursuing education after high school**. Of those, **25%** indicated that they were studying something **related to the environment**.

Here are all the things they are studying: *anthropology, art education, chemistry, community health, contemplative education, creative writing, earth and environmental sciences, environmental chemistry, environmental engineering, environmental policy, forestry, gender studies, geographic information systems, global issues, health exercise science, international affairs, lighting and sound design, marine studies, medical anthropology, music performance, nurse practitioner, physics, plant biology/ecology, resource conservation, wildlife biology.*

...Take action to improve the environment, and volunteer to address specific issues:

100% of respondents were able to **describe actions they have taken to improve the environment**. Here are just a few examples.

*My research as a PhD student is focused on efficient and practical energy capture and storage from the sun, so **I hope that my research will help make solar energy more prevalent and affordable for addressing world energy demands.***

*It can be as simple as utilizing the Leave No Trace mentality that was instilled with me during my time in the CAP program. I take every opportunity to **clean up the river I am rafting on...** **I usually come away with 2 garbage bags** of trash from just the river, after every river trip.*

*Tons of **internships** that I have worked **to improve both our community and environment.** (Out Boulder, Thorne Nature Experience, Adelante (@Boulder High) & Clean Water Action). And on a daily level, I practice leave no trace, recycling/ using reusable products, etc. and encourage others to take good environmental practices in their own daily lives.*

*At the house I'm renting a room in, we have **a full garden**, both inside the yard and out near the street where we encourage people to buy or trade or just help themselves to fresh produce. Also, we keep **multiple bee hives and help other people** with their hives.*

...Pursue paid work in environmental field:

Almost half of respondents (40%) described **paid work in the environmental field**. For example:

*I worked for an organization called Green Corps...[as] a Field Organizer [for] Climate Reality Project...I ran a campaign at Colorado State University ... to **engage students in the 2015 Paris Climate Talks**. My team of interns and I put on several big visibility events, collected over 5,000 petition signatures demanding strong action on climate change, and worked with clubs to promote sustainability on campus.*

*I [am] at Genentech, where I assist with **the compliance and regulation of animal welfare** for the company. Previously, I was a research assistant in a lab at Mills College (Oakland, CA), studying the **genetic diversity of rare and endangered California wildflowers**.*

*I'm a youth worker and program coordinator for a youth service in a remote community on the far north coast of New South Wales, Australia. **I facilitate groups for at-risk youth**...these groups focus on developing self-esteem, confidence, mindfulness and other positive emotional coping skills. We also run **annual outdoor camps** in partnership with Outward Bound as well as with a **wilderness therapy program**.*

*I am currently a PhD student at Michigan State University, working closely with the United States Geological Survey. **My research deals with water quality** at recreational beaches in the Great Lakes region, and tracking physical, meteorological, and hydrological impacts on contamination of waters near the shoreline.*

*I work freelance in **documentary film production**. Last year I did archival research and fact checking for the **Oceanic Preservation Society** on "Racing Extinction," and I am currently working as a production assistant/archivist for a documentary called "Maurizio Cattelan: Be Right Back."*

*Senior Professional **Research Assistant**, CU-Boulder, Dept. of Geological Sciences.*

***Forester** at Menominee Tribal Enterprises in Wisconsin.*

*Program Assistant at **cityWILD**, where I help run the after school, and summer programming.*

...Keep in touch with each other and with Cottonwood:

78% of respondents said that they **keep in touch with other CI alumni** and **88%** of those who live in the Denver area expressed an **interest in attending or volunteering for CI events** and volunteer projects.

Ideas for activities included: beer, biking, climbing, coffee, happy hour, kayaking, a picnic, and/or rafting.

FOND MEMORIES, DEEP IMPACT

Alumni described "favorite stories" and memories in detail. People described the skills they learned, confidence they gained, and the camaraderie they experienced.

*The two biggest moments that stand out to me are: our fire mitigation project **and learning to make survival shelters** out of natural materials.*

*I have told so many people about what I learned in the **fire mitigation** project. **Even today I can explain** that the forests in CO became overgrown because humans began suppressing the natural brush fires which was an essential part of our forests' ecosystem.*

*Trying to sleep in a shelter we made from scratch and **trying not to freeze to death** in Nederland at night. **Sounds horrible, but looking back at it, it was the best part.***

*I especially loved the two overnight backpacking trips that we took as a group, **I still tell stories from those trips!** I remember...we scattered in the woods at night with blindfolds on and had to find our way back to the campfire by the sound of Ford's drum. **It was scary at first, but we all quickly tapped into an intuition and greater awareness of our surroundings** in order to find our way back.*

***Developing a rapport with each of the wolves** was my favorite memory. When Kent took the group on a tour to meet the wolves, it was clear that each had its own unique personality. It was great to see how myself and the other students responded to the wolves, and vice versa.*

*Getting dirty, and **reveling in my peers' mutual contentment.** Sitting around fires and forgetting about the city, enabling us to talk about more serious issues without fear of distraction through ever-present technology and urban noise.*

*My favorite memory of Conwood institute was sitting around a snowy campfire playing music, watching the stars and talking with my classmates. **I'm very fond of the time spent making real connections with people in a very real way.***

Alumni attribute their sense of confidence, purpose, responsibility, leadership, love and respect for nature to CI.

***I would not of gone into the wilderness if it was not for CI** and Ford Church...I did not have the confidence nor the knowledge to attempt a camping trip that didn't involve my car... **Now I have the confidence and knowledge to take 7-day trips into the wilderness** miles away from civilization.*

***Positive role modeling and mentorship helped me find greater confidence in myself and my ability to survive in and take care of nature.** These skills and experiences have undoubtedly contributed to my desire to work with young people and indigenous people in a way that acknowledges and respects Mother Nature...rather than feeling overwhelmed by environmental injustice, I feel empowered to contribute to meaningful change.*

It was one of the most important experiences I had as a teenager.** The Community Adventure Program and Earth Task Force (which I helped start as a direct result of my experience in CAP) **gave me purpose in life that was previously lacking.

*My work with CI gave me **a sense of ownership over my community and empowered me to get involved**...Being a part of such a passionate and active environmental community taught me that **there are people out there who** share my values, can recognize injustice, and **will band together to fight for change.***

It gave me a sense of importance and duty** to maintaining the beauty of the world, so that future generations have something to admire as well. **It also gave me levels of self sufficiency** that I lacked prior to the class, in the context of outdoor survival and general comfortability. The most unambiguous answer would be that **it made me feel like a better person, and still does through its lasting effects.

*Participating in CAP **started me on a path to create positive change in our world.** I believe having the experience with my fellow classmates, in participating in our fire mitigation project*

and learning wilderness survival brought me more good in my life than I ever would have thought possible from a single class. I become attentive to environmental causes and I had an example of really cool people doing lots of good in our world- an example to how my life could look one day.

*CAP gave us **an appreciation for giving back to the community**. When I was in the program, we did a fire mitigation project and went through a mitigation training and then four days of volunteer work where we cleared trees and debris from at-risk forests. **CAP was a great launch pad to continue working in our community.***

***Improved my ability to work in a group**, especially planning local-scale activism*

*Greatly! It helped me improve my understanding of the outdoors and how to be safe and respectful in the backcountry. Also it **improved my confidence and leadership skills**.*

*The program instilled in me **a deep respect for the natural world, and a genuine passion for conservation projects**. I would say that CAP was a large influence on my returning to school to pursue a second BA in biology, which allowed me to explore my interest in ecology and environmental conservation further.*

*Huge turning points! **I learned to love understanding and interacting with the environment**. Lead to a career path as well as a personal passion.*

The CI experience was critical to who they are as people and as leaders.

*This was my favorite class in High School, **many of my work decisions and life directions can be connected back to CAP**.*

*Cottonwood has given me the skills to see what needs to be done and an understanding of the steps that I can take to make a change. **I frequently tap into the learning and skills learned on those trips and share them with students of my own.***

*I gained confidence, leadership experience, group facilitation, outdoor experience, connections in my community, friendships, critical thinking skills. **It was a formative experience.***

ⁱ In addition, there was limited data collection at some of the Alumni Events. More information from these events is available upon request.

ⁱⁱ The survey was administered between February and September of 2016. Respondents had been enrolled in CI programs between the years 2000 and 2014.

Cottonwood Institute Logic Model: CAPⁱ, ETFⁱⁱ, AND MULTI-DAY PROJECTS (2/23/2015)

Inputs	→Activities				→Outputs	Outcomes		
		CAP	ETF	MDP		→Short Term	→Intermediate	→Long-Term
Cottonwood Institute staff & instructors	Research	✓	✓		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # Programs • # Participants Served • # Contact Hrs. / Participant • # Contact Hrs. / Program • # Program Days • # Service Learning Hrs. / Program • Donor Supported Program Demographics <p><i>Please contact Cottonwood staff for current information about outputs.</i></p>	<p><u>Student Knowledge & Skills:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangible applicable knowledge of local environmental issues • Practical communication skillsⁱⁱⁱ • 21st Century Skills: Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Collaboration, Communication, Leadership, Creativity, Civic & Personal Responsibility, Work Ethic. <p><u>Student Affect / Attitude:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love of the natural world • Awareness of their place in the natural world • Passion to protect the natural world • Increased: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Self-awareness, / personal environmental ethic ○ Sense of empowerment <p><u>Students build friendships.</u></p>	<p><i>Students take these next steps after the program^{iv}</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to others about what they have learned • Recommend their program to others • Explore the outdoors • Seek out more information • Possibly continue education in the environmental field • Take action to improve the environment • Possibly volunteer to address particular issues • Pursue paid work in environmental field • Possibly pursue a career in the environmental field • Maintain or improve academic achievement • Keep in touch with each other and with Cottonwood 	<p>Cottonwood participants are a generation of 21st century leaders who are environmentally aware, civically engaged, & empowered to make a positive impact with their communities^v</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Cottonwood participants create national changes in education, behavior & policy related to the environment</p>
	Journaling	✓	✓	ST ^{vi}				
	Teambuilding / Leadership Activities	✓	✓	✓				
	Hikes	✓	ST	✓				
	Field trips	✓	✓					
Educational partners & students (grades 6-12)	Overnight camping trips	✓	ST	✓				
Funding	Community experts	✓	✓	ST				
Locations	Project-based learning	✓	✓	✓				
Curriculum & design	Environmental service-learning	✓	✓	✓				
Supplies								
Transportation	Teaching:							
	• Wilderness skills	✓		✓				
	• Environmental issues	✓	✓	✓				
	• Leadership skills	✓	✓	✓				

ⁱ Community Adventure Program

ⁱⁱ Earth Task Force

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g., make professional phone calls, send professional e-mails, ask for donations

^{iv} These steps are indicators of Ecological Literacy (ecoliteracy), which is defined as the ability to understand the natural systems that make life on earth possible. To be ecoliterate means understanding the principles of organization of ecological communities (i.e. ecosystems) & using those principles for creating sustainable human communities. An ecologically literate society would be a sustainable society which did not destroy the natural environment on which they depend. Ecological literacy is a powerful concept as it creates a foundation for an integrated approach to environmental problems. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_literacy

^v Leadership” may be local or global: can range from influencing family & friends to recycle, to teaching, to changing policy

^{vi} ST = “Sometimes”