



Cultivating Capacity, Growing Impact: Final Evaluation of the Environmental Solutions Forum

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Final Report

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Table of Contents

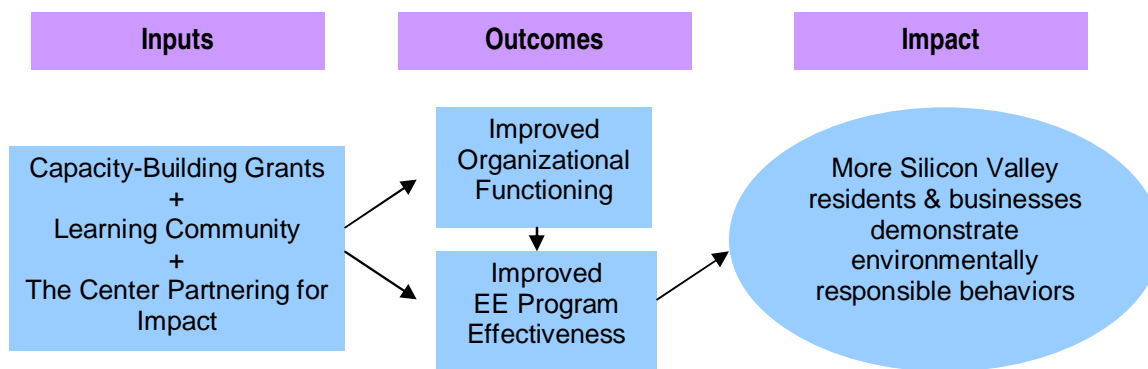
I. Introduction	1
Overview	1
Initiative Components	1
ESF Cohort Participants	2
The National and Local Context	3
Purpose and Contribution of this Evaluation	4
II. Evaluation Methods	5
Methods Overview	5
Key Informant Interviews	5
MOUs and Logic Models	6
ESF Cohort Organization Documents	6
Self-Assessment Tools	6
Reports from Quarterly Milestone Check-Ins, and Check-Ins between LFA and the Center Staff	7
Wins Log	7
Program Tables	7
Site Visits with Selected Organizations	7
Strengths and Limitations	7
III. Key Findings: Reaching More People, Doing Better Environmental Education	9
Reaching More People in the Silicon Valley	9
Progress toward Environmental Education Best Practice Standards	9
Improving the Quality of Environmental Education through Multiple Exposures	10
Increased Capacity to Influence Private Sector Actors, Policy-Makers, and Community Members to Take Environmental Action	14
IV. Key Findings: Capacity-Building that Lead to Improved Program Effectiveness	17
Capacity-Building Projects Undertaken by ESF Organizations	17
Capacity-Building Most Directly Linked to Increasing Breadth of Environmental Education	18
Capacity-Building at the Top: Board Development	19
Building Learning Organizations: Increasing the Use of Evaluation for Internal Program Feedback and External Communications	20
Promoting the Mission while Building Capacity and Sustainability: Fundraising, Communications, and Outreach	22
V. Conclusions and Implications: The Effects of ESF Beyond Building the Capacity of Individual Organizations	25
The Potential of ESF to Change the Face of Environmental Education in Northern California through the Dissemination of Best Practices	25
ESF as a Model of Effective Capacity-Building through High-Engagement Philanthropy	26
Evaluators' Assessment of What Was Critical to ESF's Success	30
Conclusion	32
Appendices	34
Appendix A: Initiative Logic Models & Theory of Change	34
Appendix B: Evaluation Results Tables	34
Appendix C: Evaluation Data Collection Instruments	34
Appendix D: Cohort Information	34

I. Introduction

Overview

Environmental Solutions Forum (ESF) is a four-year social venture fund¹ designed to increase the effectiveness of environmental education (EE) in the Silicon Valley by strengthening and connecting organizations. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation's² Center for Venture Philanthropy (the Center) spearheaded the design and management of ESF. According to ESF's Theory of Change,³ improved organizational functioning and program impact would occur with capacity-building investments, a participant learning community and a high-engagement partnership with the Center in the venture philanthropy model. Ultimately, the purpose of improving organizational functioning and improving program effectiveness is to increase the number of Silicon Valley residents who demonstrate environmentally responsible behaviors.

**Exhibit 1-1:
Overview of the ESF Theory of Change**



Initiative Components

The ESF initiative design includes a variety of components:

- 1. Multi-year capacity-building grants and logic models.** Fifteen organizations received three years of funding for capacity-building projects. Each organization developed and finalized a logic model in discussion with the Center staff to identify how capacity-building investments would contribute to organizational functioning that would in turn deliver increased community impact.
- 2. Quarterly learning community meetings.** On a quarterly basis, the Center convened the executive directors (and sometimes program directors, board chairs and other representatives as appropriate) from the 15 ESF cohort organizations to participate in meetings for peer exchange and learning. Topics of these meetings varied.⁴ At the end of each meeting, the Center solicited

¹ ESF officially launched on Earth Day 2003 and provided three years of funding. The overall duration of the initiative was four years, including the initial planning and final completion phases.

² ESF began with Peninsula Community Foundation, an organization that merged with Community Foundation of Silicon Valley. The new entity is Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

³ See the Appendix for the Theory of Change that the Center for Venture Philanthropy developed for ESF.

⁴ See the Appendix for a list of cohort meeting topics.

feedback from participants on the meeting as well as input to plan the next. These meetings also served as opportunities for coordination and collaboration among members of the ESF cohort.

3. **Technical assistance and support to encourage overall organizational capacity development.** The Center staff provided organizations with direct technical assistance and support in the process of implementing their capacity-building plans.
4. **The Accountability-for-Results process.** Integral to the venture philanthropy model is an accountability process that focuses on results. The Center staff met quarterly with cohort members to discuss progress made in the previous quarter, challenges or opportunities encountered, how to address those situations, and whether any course adjustments were indicated. The Center and cohort representatives anchored their conversations to sets of mutually agreed upon quarterly milestones and the overall logic model and capacity-building plan for the organization.
5. **Connecting organizations with ideas, investors, and resources.** Also as part of the venture philanthropy model, the Center staff connected ESF organizations with investors as opportunities arose in quarterly milestone or other ad hoc conversations. Similarly, the Center staff would raise ideas with organizations based on their knowledge of activities and interest across the cohort to help coordinate efforts and seed collaboration where it made sense. Lastly, the Center staff would connect organizations with other resources such as pro-bono consulting as needs arose.
6. **Leadership coaching.** In the second year of ESF, the Center launched a leadership coaching component of the initiative. Motivation from the cohort to request adding this to the ESF model came after one executive director shared his success using coaching as part of his capacity-building plan. Executive directors divided into subsets for small group coaching and also had the opportunity to participate in individual coaching.

ESF Cohort Participants

The Center invited 15 organizations, including 13 community-based nonprofits and two County Offices of Education outdoor education departments, to

participate in ESF. The Center staff worked with its foundation Community Programs staff to identify a set of environmental organizations whose services filled a unique niche in the region.

Exhibit 1-2: ESF Participation and Grantmaking	
Number of Organizations Starting in ESF:	15
Number of Organizations Completing ESF:	12
Total Dollars Granted Over 3-Year Period:	\$1,643,234

Exhibit 1-3: The 15 Original ESF Cohort Organizations

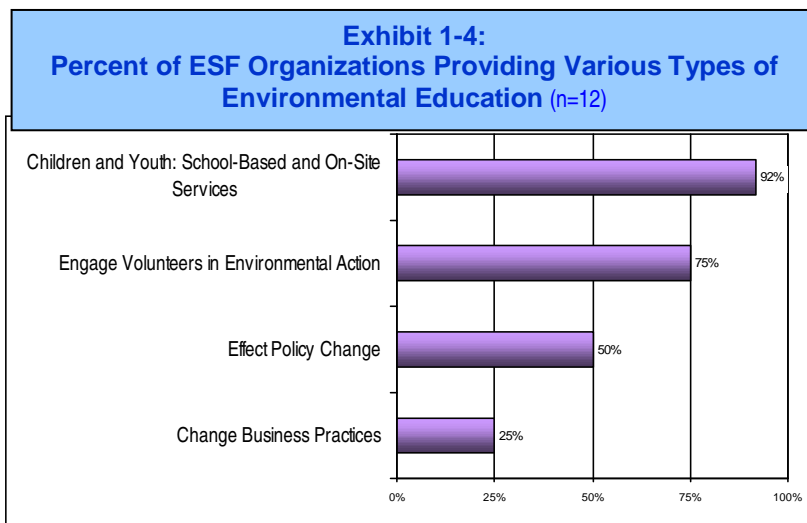
▪ Acterra	▪ Santa Clara County Office of Education, Walden West
▪ Children’s Discovery Museum	▪ San Mateo County Office of Education
▪ Coyote Point Museum	▪ Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition
▪ Environmental Volunteers	▪ Silicon Valley Audubon Society
▪ Hidden Villa	▪ Wildlife Associates
▪ The Natural Step	▪ Sustainable Conservation
▪ Save Our Shores	▪ Youth Sciences Institute
▪ Save the Bay	

ESF organizations were identified at the beginning of the initiative because they filled an important “niche” in the local EE landscape; some were even approaching their 50-year mark. The Center’s capacity-building resources were directed at exploration of the core business model and organizational leadership was expected to rigorously explore options for improving practice and sustainability. The nature and scope of these challenges necessitated a focus inward on fundamental issues of mission, governance, and business model, in order to shape a lever for the ESF outcome of increased community impact.

Twelve out of the fifteen organizations met ESF goals. While three organizations were involved for various lengths of time in the initiative, high-order organizational challenges quickly surfaced when the organizations became engaged in ESF work. It is a success that 80% of the cohort fully completed the three-year initiative designed to scale impact. This completion rate would not have been as high if the Center had not been as flexible as they were in adapting to shifts in organizational priorities and needs over time. For this reason, the outcomes evaluation focuses on the 12 organizations that stayed within the ESF intended plan.⁵

The National and Local Context

Nationally, the focus on organizational capacity-building and effectiveness has increased significantly among forward-thinking philanthropists over the past decade. The creation in 2000 and rapid growth of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) – a national funder network dedicated to supporting funders and their efforts to strengthen nonprofits and philanthropic organizations – is just one indicator of this trend.



One key struggle of the capacity-building field has been connecting changes in capacity, such as strengthened communications and IT systems, with increases in effectiveness at the program or service delivery level. The Center knew this at the outset of ESF, and therefore intentionally designed the initiative so that all efforts were aligned with the goal of showing results in improved EE effectiveness. In this context, ESF was an experiment to explore whether strengthening a cohort of organizations working in the same region and in a similar context area could actually result in evidence of more effective programs and services.

⁵ Although 12 organizations met the initiative goals, 13 organizations completed data collection for the final evaluation. In addition, the thirteenth organization had indeed received capacity-building assistance and had succeeded in increasing its organizational capacity; therefore this organization was included in the overall count of organizations where appropriate.

The field of EE comprises a diverse group of organizations addressing different topics, using different methods, and reaching different audiences. For some ESF organizations the audience is students; for others it is adult private citizens; for still others it is companies or policy-makers. For some organizations, the primary focus is “hands-on” scientific education; for others it is activism. The diversity of the field is reflected in the diversity of the ESF cohort in that each had its particular focus on EE (see Exhibit 1-3 above).

The EE field is currently at a developmental stage in which it is codifying and documenting what constitutes effective EE, and creating ways to measure effectiveness. This has provided incentive and motivation for ESF cohort participants to focus on efforts to develop tools and processes to measure the effectiveness of EE. In reflecting as a group on developments in the EE field, ESF cohort participants were not learning much that they did not already know. However, in stepping back and analyzing program design and delivery through the lenses of capacity-building, effectiveness, and evaluation, they became more intentional about using best practice standards to drive the evolution of programming.

Purpose and Contribution of this Evaluation

The Center engaged LaFrance Associates, LLC (LFA), a research and evaluation consulting firm with expertise in evaluating capacity-building efforts in the environmental field, to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of ESF. The purposes of the evaluation are:

1. To capture and document lessons learned regarding how to effectively design and execute a capacity-building initiative.
2. To provide information for reflection over the course of the initiative for the Center and cohort members.
3. To collect evidence of the connection between increased organizational capacity and improved program effectiveness.

In addition to having provided information for reflection and learning over the course of the initiative, this evaluation makes an important and unique contribution to the field. There is strong and consistent evidence that capacity-building through ESF indeed translated into more people being reached with more effective EE in the Silicon Valley. Moreover, ESF has adhered to best practice standards in the field of capacity-building, thus reinforcing and contributing an effective case for the field to model.

II. Evaluation Methods

The Center for Venture Philanthropy (the Center) engaged LaFrance Associates, LLC (LFA) to conduct an initiative-wide evaluation of Environmental Solutions Forum (ESF). The LFA evaluation design has been both formative and summative: to provide ongoing information to the Center and cohort members, to support learning and reflection, and to provide a comprehensive final assessment of whether this four-year initiative achieves its purpose.

Methods Overview

LFA used a variety of methods to collect data for this report. These include:

- Key informant interviews with executive directors;
- Key informant interviews with the Center staff;
- A review of annual Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between each cohort member and the Center;
- A review of logic models for cohort member programs;
- The Institute for Conservation Leadership’s organizational capacity benchmarking tool (ICL tool);
- The “Benchmarking Best Practices in Environmental Education” tool (EEB tool) developed for this initiative;
- Notes from quarterly milestone check-ins conducted by the Center staff with ESF executive directors;
- Periodic check-ins between LFA and the Center staff in order to receive updates about each organization;
- A catalog of “wins” maintained by the Center staff of benefits (both intended and unintended) that organizations experienced and changes that occurred as a result of ESF;
- Tables filled out by program staff at baseline and follow-up that describe programs and give information on the number of people reached, estimated number and duration of contacts with each program participant, etc.; and
- Site visits with selected organizations.

We explain below the role each method played in the assessment of ESF.

Key Informant Interviews

We conducted interviews with both the ESF executive directors and with the Center staff. Interviews with ESF cohort organizations allowed the executive directors to take a look back over the experience with ESF and to answer comprehensive questions about how capacity building through ESF connected to changes in their organization’s capacity – particularly their organization’s ability to provide high-quality environmental education (EE). Executive directors could also voice their opinions on what worked well and what could have worked better about specific components of the initiative, and about the initiative overall.

Interviews with the Center staff provided a bird’s-eye view of the initiative, and provided information on the Center staff’s views about the most important changes brought about by ESF.

Staff from the Center were also in a particularly good position to see what lessons were learned from the initiative model.

MOUs and Logic Models

At the beginning of the initiative, each cohort organization worked with the Center staff to create logic models for their change process that tied the organizational capacity-building steps to the ultimate delivery of increased community impact. The Center staff with each organization drafted a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that detailed quarterly process milestones and resource expectations. In preparing the final report, we reviewed logic models and MOUs to see where each organization was at the beginning of the Initiative and its expectations for achieving planned goals for capacity expansion.

ESF Cohort Organization Documents

For the final report, we requested ESF cohort organizations to send us any organization documents that would help round out our understanding of their increased capacity. Organizations sent us such documents as program marketing materials, records of media exposure, formal program evaluations, and strategic planning documents.

Self-Assessment Tools

Two self-assessment instruments played roles both in evaluation and in the capacity-building itself: the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) tool,⁶ and the Environmental Education Benchmarking (EEB) tool.⁷ The ICL tool allows organizations to rate themselves on various dimensions in terms of general organizational functions (e.g. planning, fundraising, board development, etc). The EEB has items that address a range of standards of excellence in environmental education. These tools come in the form of self-assessment workbooks, and ask key informants within organizations to capacity (ICL tool), and capacity to deliver excellent environmental education programs (EEB tool).

Cohort members used both these tools early in the initiative as a way to engage in self-reflection as they embarked on the process of developing their ESF capacity-building plans. They could use these tools to identify areas in which their organizations could benefit from funding and technical assistance. For example, one organization used the tools at a board retreat to begin developing a new strategic plan, and at another organization a new executive director used the tools to help her organization make the transition from her predecessor's to her own agenda. ESF participants also revisited these tools to fill them out periodically over the course of the initiative in order to chart their progress in these areas.

To use the tools as part of the final evaluation of the Initiative, we asked organizations to look at their baseline scores, to provide a current score, and to provide a narrative explanation of the change in their rating over time.

⁶ This tool was adapted for ESF from the ICL benchmarking workbook. The Institute for Conservation Leadership is a national nonprofit organization that strengthens leaders, organizations, and coalitions or networks that protect and conserve the Earth. Its benchmarking tool can be found at: <http://www.icl.org/toolkits/benchmarking.php>.

⁷ LFA developed this tool specifically for ESF cohort members. Readers may find it in Appendix C.

Reports from Quarterly Milestone Check-Ins, and Check-Ins between LFA and the Center Staff

Each quarter, the Center staff met individually with the cohort executive directors to review their milestones from the past quarter, discuss progress and encountered roadblocks, and to adjust milestones as necessary for the next quarter. We used the reports to get detailed descriptions of ESF capacity building for each organization, and to access the journey towards increased organizational competency. LFA was able to gather additional information during periodic check-ins with the Center staff during which the Center staff provided the “stories” of each organization.

Wins Log

The “Wins Log” was an ongoing log kept by the Center staff of intended and unintended “wins” that resulted from participation in the ESF cohort. They were classified by the following categories: resource connection, expertise connection, and collaboration. Some of the important benefits of participation in ESF pertained to gaining access to networks that would otherwise be outside of the circles of ESF organizations, and the Wins Log tracked the ways in which the Center staff mobilized these networks to connect ESF organizations to needed resources or expertise.

Program Tables

At the beginning of their participation in ESF, each organization filled out “program tables,” which asked for brief descriptions of the program, total number of people served during the year, average number of contacts with program participants, total number of contacts with program participants, and average length of contact with program participants. At follow-up, the program descriptions were important to our ability to understand the ways in which programs embodied best practices in environmental education. In addition, we used the numbers they provided about number of people reached, etc, to report on whether and how organizations expanded their audiences or increased the number of contacts made with each person.

Site Visits with Selected Organizations

At the end of the initiative, we visited six of the ESF cohort members in order to see, firsthand, new or enhanced programs. At these visits, we also took the opportunity to obtain additional information about the relationship between ESF capacity building and the programs that we focused on during the site visits.

Strengths and Limitations

The methods that we used have both strengths and limitations. A primary strength is the access we had to so many different data sources. Because we collected so many different *types* of data, we were able to “triangulate”: verify conclusions drawn from one data source by checking them against other data sources. In addition, qualitative data collection – key informant interviews and extensive document review – enables us to get a deep understanding of the stories of each cohort member. Capacity-building is unique for each organization participating in ESF, and it is only through

qualitative data collection that evaluators can gain access to the details that help us to more completely understand these unique stories.

We supplemented the qualitative data collection with tools and short surveys completed by the participants. These are quantitative in the sense that they produce numeric data, but the purpose is primarily descriptive. These tools allow us to describe the self-perceived change among cohort members over the course of the initiative. These tools and short surveys complement the detail provided by quantitative data, allowing us to step back from the stories to get a bird's-eye view of capacity-building in the aggregate.

Limitations of data collection arose primarily with program tables, the EEB tool, and the ICL tool. Organizations filled these out at baseline and follow-up (a four year span) and it was often the case that the person who had filled out the tools at baseline was no longer with the organization at follow-up. Especially for the program tables, sometimes this meant that the person filling out the tool did not agree with what had originally been filled out at baseline. Where this was the case, we did our best to work with current staff to revise the baseline so that the baseline and follow-up tables could be compared in a way that made sense.

Regarding the EEB and ICL tools, we repeatedly ran into the problem of organizations showing little improvement between baseline and follow-up because organizations had rated themselves very highly at baseline. These high baseline ratings tended to mask actual improvement that did take place during the initiative. Where this was the case we balanced the ratings data with qualitative data about *how* organizations actually built capacity and saw improved effectiveness within their organizations.

III. Key Findings: Reaching More People, Doing Better Environmental Education

Over the course of the initiative, Environmental Solutions Forum (ESF) cohort organizations modified program designs to deepen the environmental education (EE) experience, as indicated by best practice standards. They also made tough but important decisions about discontinuing existing programs and launching new ones with greater promise. The evaluation team asked organizations to provide snapshots of their programmatic profiles at the beginning and at the end of the initiative. We found that on balance organizations are now reaching more people overall, and are reaching people with better quality EE. Likewise, organizations focusing on changing business practices and policy change saw improvements in their program effectiveness, as described in this chapter.

Reaching More People in the Silicon Valley

Over the course of the initiative, ESF organizations enhanced the quality of their EE programs by building capacity that made it possible to implement EE best practice standards. As a result, today as compared to before ESF, **an additional 13,055 Silicon Valley residents are being reached annually** with programs based on best practices, and **programs serving over half a million individuals annually have been redesigned in accordance with best practices.**

Exhibit 3-1: Increasing Breadth and Depth – ESF Program Effectiveness Results	
Additional Silicon Valley Residents Reached Annually with Multiple Exposures ¹	13,055
Total Number of Silicon Valley Residents Reached Annually with More Effective EE ²	504,322

^{1,2} Based on data from eight organizations providing EE to individuals.

² Includes reach of programs that made progress toward standards of effective EE, such as multiple exposures.

This finding indicates ESF achieved its primary objective of supporting capacity-building improvements that lead to increased program effectiveness. More people in the Silicon Valley are being reached today with effective EE than before ESF, growing the number of stewards of our environment in the region.

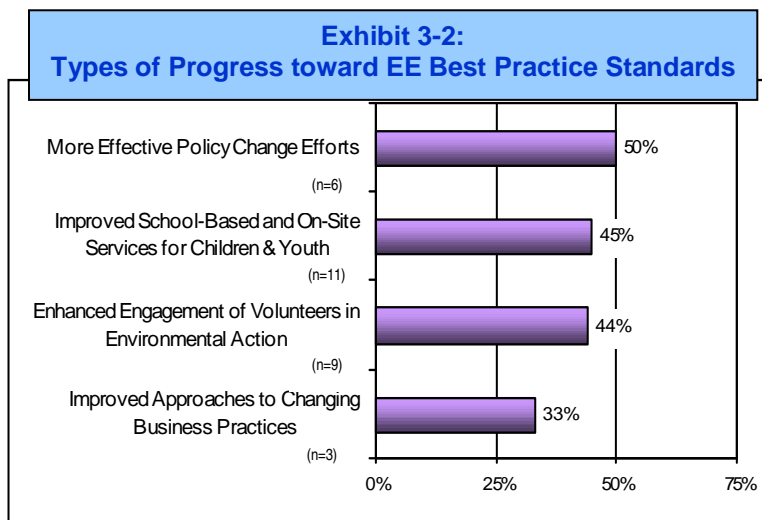
Progress toward Environmental Education Best Practice Standards

A major strategy by which ESF aimed to achieve improved program effectiveness through capacity-building was to bring the cohort together around a set of common standards for excellence in EE and to promote the intentional integration of these standards into program development and execution. While cohort organizations already provided high quality EE at the start of the initiative, they had not yet fully taken advantage of new developments in the study of EE: the systematic identification of best practices. Early on in the initiative, ESF provided to its cohort members the time and mental space to take a step back and reflect on the EE scholarship that put forward specific standards of how to provide EE in a manner that would most effectively:

- Inculcate scientific/environmental knowledge;

- Impart an ethic of sustained environmental stewardship; and
- Maximize the probability of responsible environmental action.

ESF organizations assessed implementation of best practice standards at the beginning and then again at the end of the initiative using a benchmarking tool developed specifically for this initiative and purpose (the EE benchmarking tool). Evaluators compared baseline and final scores on this tool to assess the percentage of organizations for which scores had risen, and the results are reported in Exhibit 3-2 at right. The exhibit shows half the organizations or fewer making progress in each area, but this is due to the fact that most of the organizations were already implementing best practice standards at the beginning of the initiative. Narratives that executive directors included when they filled out the final EE benchmarking tool shows that – even when baseline scores were high – organizations have made strides in aligning programs with best practices and/or have additional programs aligned with best practices.



Note: The percents of organizations making progress towards best practices are not higher largely because their programs were already implementing best practice standards at baseline.

The remainder of this chapter provides detail about specific ways in which ESF organizations improved the quality of their EE programs in alignment with best practice standards.

Improving the Quality of Environmental Education through Multiple Exposures

According to best practice standards in the field of EE, the most effective education is characterized by intensity of exposure and by multiple exposures. “Intensity of exposure” refers to the way that programs fully engage their participants, offering them experiential learning, using inquiry-based methods, and evoking empathy for the natural world. ESF cohort members, even at the beginning of the initiative, met these standards; there was no lack in terms of the intensity of exposure. Instead, it was in the area of **multiple exposures** that these organizations had opportunity to improve their programming.

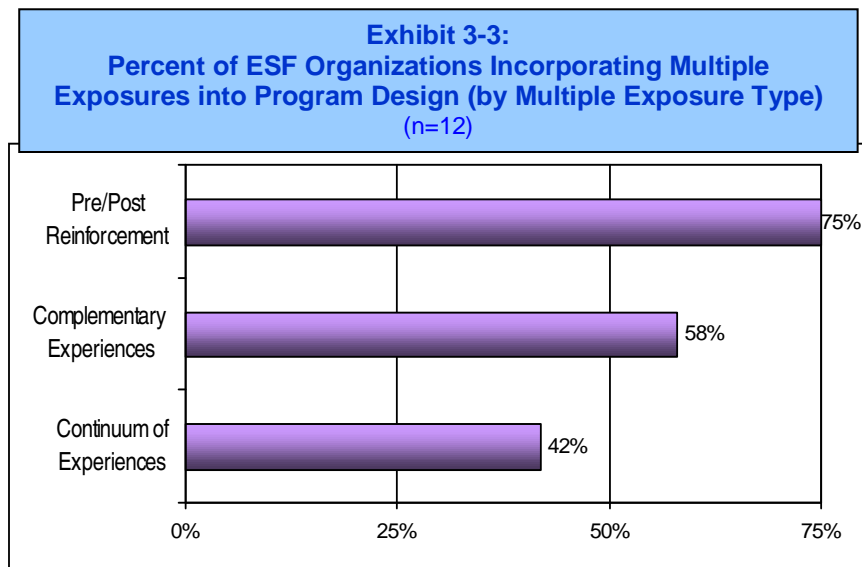
“Multiple exposures” means that audiences come into repeated contact with EE experiences or material. Multiple exposures can take a variety of forms:

- **Complementary experiences – Participating in multiple experiences that convey similar and related information in different settings or using different methods.** People learn better when they have the opportunity to approach the material from a variety of angles: material tends to “click” once they have had different types of exposures to it. For EE, complementary experiences can include: doing something active outdoors *plus* learning in a classroom setting; attending a presentation *plus* having a series of hands-on outdoor experiences; learning about

something from a purely scientific angle *plus* experiencing a perspective of environmental activism.

- **Pre/post reinforcement – Reinforcing what is learned at a focal experience through preparatory and follow-up exposure.** Pre/post reinforcement is a special class of complementary experience. It usually comprises classroom activities or curriculum that a teacher uses before and after a field trip or other type of hands-on experience. The idea behind the pre-work is that people learn best when they have a “cognitive framework” they can use to process incoming information. Environmental educators can use preparatory exposure to introduce audiences to the material, thus laying the groundwork for depth of learning and retention as they go into the focal experience (such as a field trip or hands-on experience). Even well-processed information has a half-life and can fade over time if not reinforced. Therefore, EE tends to “stick” better when a focal experience is reinforced soon after with follow-up educational experiences.
- **Continuum of experiences – Participating in a series of linked experiences over the long term.** The most thorough educational experiences are long-term ones. Just as students can learn age-appropriate math or language arts throughout their years in school, they can also participate in age-appropriate EE. In fact, EE can be linked to state standards for science education at each grade level and is an effective way to teach science subjects to students. A continuum of experiences may refer to programs that link throughout a student’s progress through the grades, but it also refers to repeated exposures as young people participate in programs that require ongoing participation at regular intervals (usually throughout all or part of a school year).

ESF organizations incorporated multiple exposures into their programs through a variety of strategies. Pre/post reinforcement was a strategy that included improved teacher classroom curriculum before and after activities; an example of complementary experiences was science education activities that accompanied stewardship activities; and an example of a continuum of experiences is linked EE curriculum throughout several grades. Exhibit 3-3 shows the percent of ESF organizations offering programs with each type of multiple exposure.



How ESF Organizations Increased Depth through Multiple Exposures

Exhibit 3-3 gives the overall profile of the type of multiple exposures that ESF cohort organizations offered through their programs. In Exhibit 3-4 below we further break out these categories to show specifically *how* organizations provided these different types of multiple exposures to its participants.

The most striking development in service delivery among ESF cohort organizations has been the efforts made to provide multiple exposures to program audiences. These efforts, unsurprisingly, have been directed for the most part at audiences of school-age young people. The form these efforts took varies across organizations and is summarized in Exhibit 3-4 below.

**Exhibit 3-4:
Number of ESF Organizations Building Various Types of
Multiple Exposures into Programs**

Multiple Exposure Type	Number of ESF Organizations that Built this into Their Programs
Pre/Post Reinforcement	
➤ Curriculum and student activities for classroom use before and after field trip or other experiential activities	9
➤ Follow-up materials students can download from the web for use at home	
Complementary Experiences	
➤ Classroom curriculum and materials + field trips	7
➤ Science education activities + stewardship activities	
➤ Online activities + experiential activities	
Continuum of Experiences	
➤ Repeated exposure during all or part of the school year	5
➤ Programs designed to build on one another throughout consecutive grades	

Pre/Post Reinforcement. A total of nine ESF organizations concentrated on including pre/post reinforcement strategies into their programs. For all of these programs, reinforcement strategies are part of an effort to integrate the experience into the classroom. As staff at one of the cohort organizations phrased it, “teachers are stewards of the information” that students learn while they are on field trips. Staff at these organizations realized that it was critical to work with the teachers so that the effect of the field trip would not dissipate with time. Thus they developed curricula that teachers could use both to prepare their students for the field trip experiences, and also to review the experience afterward. For several, the post-activity curriculum can be used not only immediately following the field trip, but also in the weeks and months afterward so that reinforcement can continue over a longer time period. Program staff received positive feedback from teachers about the curricula that they made available. For one program, pre/post exercises include booklets which students fill out before and after the trip. Evaluation results from these programs show that students enjoyed them as a way to assess their own gain in knowledge, and also to review what they had learned.

Complementary Experiences. As explained above, complementary experiences have a great deal of overlap with pre/post reinforcement, because reinforcement experiences tend to come in a format that differs from a focal experience and thus complements that experience. Therefore the

complementary experiences offered by ESF organizations often come in the form of pre/post reinforcement including:

- For five of the six ESF organizations that provide a before-and-after curriculum, the complementary experiences take the form of “field trip plus classroom experience.”
- Two organizations have school-based programs in which the classroom curriculum is built around a series of field trips, and two organizations have online activities that the students can access to complement a focal activity.
- One organization has a five-day camping program and encourages campers to participate in a complementary garden program – and in fact half of the campers also become gardeners.
- Another organization sets up its programs to combine an educational field trip with a stewardship activity (habitat restoration). Forty percent of those participating in the field trip sign up for the restoration project. This organization also makes available to the young people a “full suite of programs:” classroom curriculum tailored to complement a field trip; a stewardship activity to follow the field trip; and an online class to complement the in-class curriculum.

A Continuum of Experiences. Five ESF organizations have designed and are implementing programs that provide a continuum of experiences for elementary school students.

- One organization provides experiences for fifth and sixth graders; a second organization provides a program at two schools that integrates EE with science curriculum for children in the second through fifth grades. This was a pilot project at one school, and during the pilot’s second year the program was launched at a second school.
- For the program at the new school, an ESF organization engaged three partners from within the ESF cohort to participate.
- One organization implemented another school-based program in which students in grades four through six participate.
- Another organization provides vivid site-based learning experiences to students in elementary and high school. The high school students are trained to teach the younger students, and the curriculum integrates science learning (tied to state standards) and stewardship. For all of these programs, the young people participate through repeated exposures, often meeting as often as weekly throughout the school year.

Collaboration as a Vehicle for Providing Multiple Exposures

Collaboration is a hallmark of the way ESF cohort members have developed programs that provide participants with complementary and continua of exposures. Early on, the Center encouraged efforts among the cohort to look across programs, organizations, and grade levels to understand how cohort members could best

work together to provide multiple exposures. For example, two organizations may be providing programs in the same school district, and this allows them to target different grade levels. Or two organizations may be providing programs that complement one another – for example they might

“In the early analyses, it was identified that there wasn’t a lot of cohesion among ED’s in EE and science education. [...] When the leadership comes together, [we can see] the role that each one fills, and it creates a lot of opportunities for partnership, or creating new strategic goals because you see that someone’s already ‘attacking’ that.”

-ESF Cohort Member

both be taking field trips to the same area but one program focuses on science education and the other on stewardship. This was an approach that the ESF organizations took to heart.

Within the ESF cohort, four organizations have succeeded collaborating in different ways. They have either partnered to provide a school-based program, or paired up to provide complementary programs.⁸ In a particularly successful example of this type of collaboration to provide multiple exposures, four ESF organizations have partnered to provide EE to an elementary school. Through this program, the collaborative provides second- through fifth-graders with EE linked to state scientific educational standards. The curriculum and activities, piloted by one cohort member in another school, has been shown to significantly raise scores on a test of scientific knowledge administered at the beginning and the end of the school year.

It is also worth noting that collaboration has also been supported by technology capacity building: two organizations used a web-based sign-up to encourage participants to enroll in complementary programs.

Increased Capacity to Influence Private Sector Actors, Policy-Makers, and Community Members to Take Environmental Action

Three ESF cohort organizations gear most of their programming to direct environmental action and influencing private sector actors, policy-makers, and community members to take environmental action. Investments in these organizations have increased their capacity to have influence in these arenas.

Since each of the approaches of these three organizations is unique, we discuss them individually below. For each, we concentrate on the programs on which ESF capacity building focused, and we draw connections between the capacity building and the ability of each organization to create more effective programming.

Creating Environmental Leaders

One organization received ESF support to launch a new program called Be the Change (You Want to See in the World), which is designed to develop community-based environmental leaders. The program model was inspired by the recognition that the ecological challenges we face are so severe that citizens need to become change agents themselves rather than wait for the public sector to address these problems. This program is geared toward private citizens who want to be able to meet the environmental challenges, but do not know specifically how they can gain effective traction.

Be the Change lasts for nine months beginning each September. It offers monthly seminars, workshops, student projects, panel discussions, and field trips. Through these activities, participants learn the skills to “act within the organizations where they work, live, worship and play to bring about significant changes in how they relate to the natural world.”

“We’re starting to develop a cohort of environmental leaders who we hope will have an impact on our region.”

-ESF Cohort Member

⁸ Other organizations attempted to provide complementary programs, but this did not always succeed.

In June 2006, the program graduated its first cohort of 26 individuals, and the second cohort begins the program in September 2006. The organization knows that this small number of individuals cannot save the planet from environmental catastrophe, but they expect to see (and have already seen) a ripple effect as participants bring their message to the communities in which they live and work. The projects that the first cohort carried out run the gamut from beginning discussions with Target about the hazards of PVC plastics, to planning a solar energy system for a condominium complex, to working against construction on lands adjacent to wetlands, to working on a task force to make San Carlos a greener city.

Holding High Tech Accountable to Environmental Standards

One ESF organization works with industry and policy-makers to ensure that the electronics industry minimizes its negative impact on the environment. This organization used ESF funding to hire an executive coach to help transition out the executive director role to a more strategic role. When ESF began, the executive director, who was also the founder of the organization, was mired in administration and operational issues. This led to staff and executive director mutual frustration. With the coach's help, the organization redefined its core message the executive director transitioned into a full-time strategic role (his strength and passion), and the organization hired a new executive director who works in partnership with this founder.

Center for Venture Philanthropy was instrumental in working with the new executive director to “transition in,” to enhance marketing and finance strategies, and to reinvigorate the organization's core business: holding high-tech accountable. In this time of transition, a key win for the organization was its partnership with Dell Computer. Through this partnership, Dell Computer moved from “industry laggard to leader” in terms of responsible production of computers. Dell announced an expanded computer recycling program that is “far more aggressive than other leading manufacturers in the U.S.”

Creating Partnerships to Find Ways for the Private Sector to Protect the Environment

A third organization establishes partnerships and working groups among representatives from private industry, environmental interests, and public agencies. These partnerships work to identify ways in which industry can voluntarily decrease its negative impact on the environment. The partnerships bring the interests of all parties to the table, with representatives coming to understand the viewpoints of one another and building trust. The end goal of the partnerships is a self-regulation agreement by which the industry representatives abide. The benefit to the environment is that these self-regulation agreements can go into effect sooner than regulation, and industry has a hand in creating agreements that benefit the environment.

The capacity-building work that this organization has done through ESF has produced stellar results. First, ESF funded a Brake Pad Partnership (BPP) that looks at the effect copper has on watersheds.

Copper is shed from automobile brake pads and gets into the water supply through rain

runoff. Before the BBP, there was no systematic science about copper's effects on water quality and aquatic life. It would take years before the BBP could show, if any, concrete results of copper's

“Funders want results, and the Brake Pad Partnership looked high-risk because copper might not turn out to be a big problem. Funders will think that they've ‘wasted their money.’ [...] But [the Center] got it – they got the value of that project, and they helped raise the funding for it.”

-ESF Cohort Member

effects - a high risk investment for foundations. Despite these obstacles, the BPP received funding from the Center and is showing great promise in terms of both identifying the effect of brake pad copper on water quality and aquatic life, and also in terms of creating solid partnerships with the brake pad industry. As the project is nearing its close, some of the manufacturers at the table are already lowering their brake pad copper content.

Beyond funding this particular project, ESF also worked with the organization – with great success – to raise its visibility. Visibility is extremely important to the work that this organization does, because gaining stature means increased credibility with key

constituencies. At the beginning of ESF, this organization had a history of being low-profile, and it had very little media coverage. As is common in nonprofits, the staff focused its energies on designing and executing programs; there was little bandwidth to establish and address marketing goals. ESF efforts thus focused on selecting a project that would resonate with the public and so raise the nonprofit’s profile. Capacity-building funds also went toward marketing and communications: the Center granted the nonprofit money to hire a search firm in order to hire a communications director, and as a result they “got a really high-quality person that we otherwise wouldn’t have found. [It’s] a real value-add.”

“[Our agency] is increasingly being recognized by others in the environmental field as an organization that successfully and proactively engages business ... in solutions that improve environmental quality.”

-ESF Cohort Member

Since the new communications director has been on board, the organization’s visibility has greatly increased, with many more media hits, including profiles of its executive director in trade publications that reach their constituencies, and an op-ed in the *New York Times*. In the 18 months prior to

data collection for this report, the organization “has had 40 substantive media hits, which is more than we ... had in our previous 11 years combined.” This increase in stature has had a very favorable effect on their ability to bring partners to the table. And, beyond this, potential partners have proactively reached out to the organization before waiting to be approached – proposing ways in which this organization can play its brokering role in a particular industry.

“Our influence in this area has increased considerably in the last four years. While decision makers used to respond favorably to what we presented, they are now proactively coming to us for help.”

-ESF Cohort Member

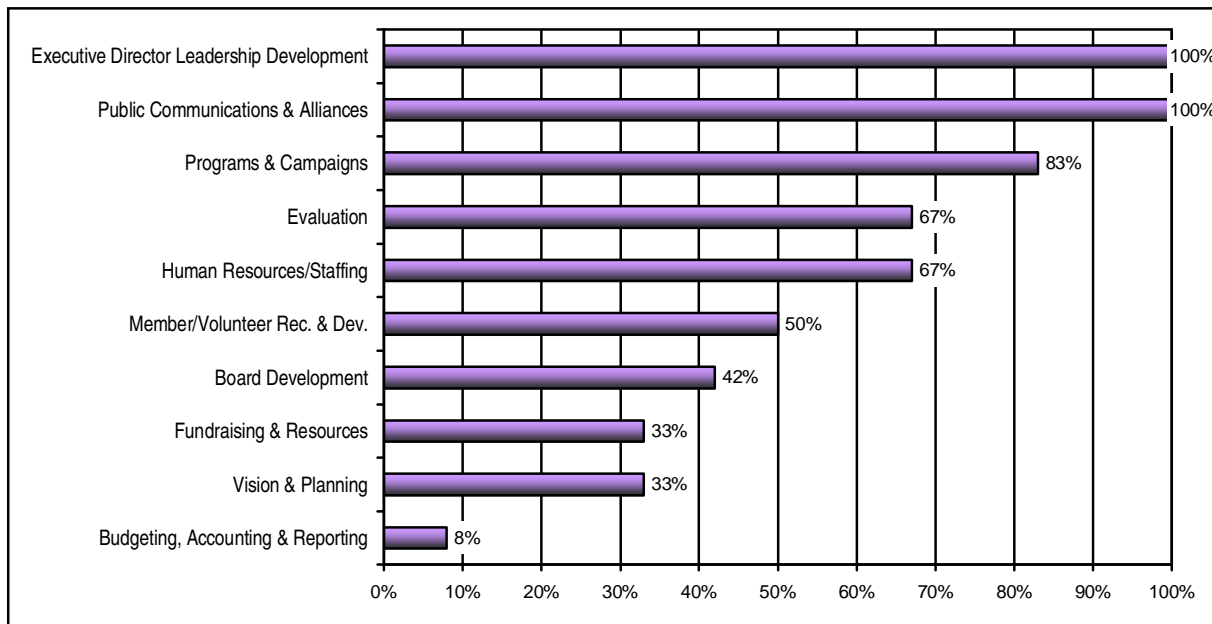
IV. Key Findings: Capacity-Building that Lead to Improved Program Effectiveness

Environmental Solutions Forum (ESF) organizations engaged in a broad spectrum of capacity-building efforts over the course of the initiative. All participating executive directors received leadership development support through individual and group coaching and quarterly cohort meetings. While some capacity-building projects are directly linked to improved program effectiveness, all projects have an impact on how organizations design, implement, and lead environmental education (EE).

Capacity-Building Projects Undertaken by ESF Organizations

Exhibit 4-1 below reveals the spectrum of capacity-building projects that ESF organizations undertook. Every ESF organization received executive director leadership development through the offering of one-on-one and group coaching, though this is not necessarily the only leadership development ESF executive directors received. The most common areas of capacity-building include marketing and public relations, programs and campaigns, evaluation, and human resources and staffing.⁹

Exhibit 4-1:
Areas of Focus for ESF Capacity-Building Projects
(n=12)

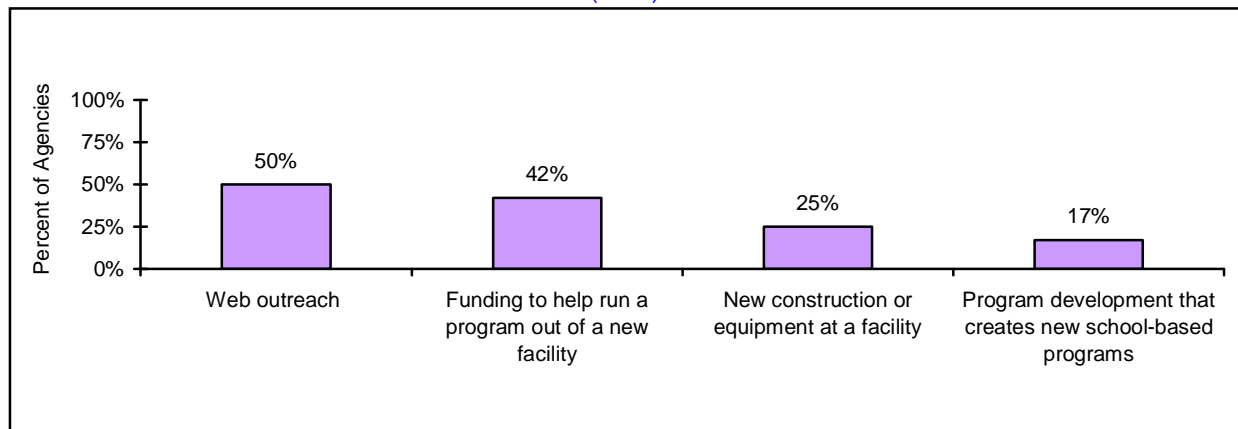


⁹ The areas of capacity-building and data in Exhibit 4-1 reflect categories in and responses to the Institute for Conservation Leadership Organizational Capacity Assessment tool.

Capacity-Building Most Directly Linked to Increasing Breadth of Environmental Education

Most ESF cohort organizations have been able to increase the number of people that they reach as well as reach new audiences. Much of this expansion has resulted from the following kinds of ESF-supported capacity building: facilities expansion, adding new equipment, web or email outreach, and program development.

Exhibit 4-2:
ESF Capacity-Building Projects that Most Directly Contribute to Increasing Breadth of Environmental Education
(n=12)



ESF funding has been used to create, or to enable the use of, new physical capacity for five cohort organizations. One organization fortuitously learned of an opportunity to use an existing Baylands facility that the city government could no longer afford to run. However, they needed funds to run a program from the facility, and thus requested and received a grant for this purpose from the Center through ESF. Now, the weekend programs that run out of the Baylands facility are popular, and sign-ups continue to increase.

Three cohort members used ESF funding to actually build something new. One organization built viewing enclosures in which program participants can view wild animals. This has greatly increased the program capacity for this organization: the enclosures are made available for educational groups, and the organization is also using these enclosures as a springboard for additional programs.

Another cohort organization built a storage facility to support its outdoor programs for elementary and high school students. The programs that were formerly run out of this site were limited in scope because there was no place to store equipment. The storage facility made possible the expansion of these flagship programs.

Web outreach is another strategy through which ESF organizations are increasing the number of people who participate in programs. For example, one organization has changed the way that it does sign-ups on its website. Formerly, people who wanted to sign up for one program might see that the program was full, and they would not sign up. The website has been reconfigured so that if one program is full, the visitor to the web page is told that there are openings in other, similar programs. This has increased the number of program participants for this organization.

Another organization made use of e-outreach software, designed to increase the rate at which people opened email “action alerts.” This is done by segmenting the market and sending customized emails to different geographic and interest groups. During the second year of ESF, this organization reported that the e-outreach had resulted in a 100% rise in members signing up online when compared to the previous fiscal year. In addition, the number of email subscribers rose by 27% over the previous year. The same organization reported another notable success during ESF’s third year: targeted emails were sent to promote a particular program and about one quarter were read, with 626 people navigating the website from embedded email links.. This organization also had more than 1200 visitors to a website “classroom” in one quarter.

Another way in which ESF organizations began to reach new audiences is simply through program expansion that grew out of engagement with ESF. To illustrate, five organizations now have new school-based programs, and one organization developed a program in which adults spend nine months working to create and launch an environmental stewardship program within their workplaces, churches, or communities.

In terms of reaching new audiences, cohort members also have been able to reach more diverse populations because of ESF capacity building. One organization received funding for programs with Title I schools whose students tend to be minority children. Another organization began to reach more diverse audiences (increasing the number of Latino and African-American child participants) as it integrated some of its programming with schools in East Palo Alto and Redwood City. An additional organization established a school-based program in East Palo Alto.

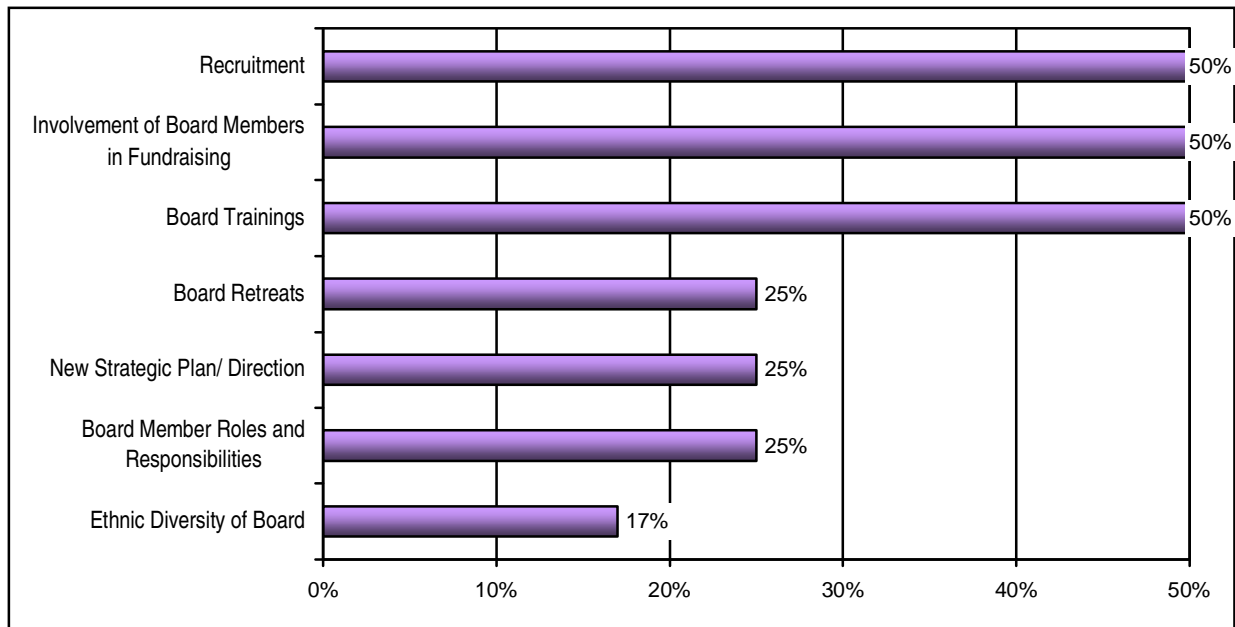
One cohort member greatly expanded its reach into the Latino community after hiring an Hispanic executive director. This executive director established a diversity plan designed to enhance minority recruitment, and also spoke on the Spanish-language channels Telemundo and Univision about conservation issues. At this same organization, website redesign included pages that provided materials to supplement program experiences. However, feedback from schools indicated that the site was not very accessible to ESL students; therefore, the organization redesigned the website to accommodate those for whom English is not their first language.

The move to reaching more audiences is not limited to the ESF organizations that serve young people. An organization that establishes partnerships to minimize the negative impact of industry on the environment also has begun reaching new audiences. This organization has used its increased visibility and stature in the field to expand its reach by moving into new industries. For example, it has launched a program focusing on one of the primary destroyers of biodiversity: invasive plant species. The organization has been working with nurseries and retail sellers of plants to homeowners (such as Home Depot) to switch from invasive plants to native or non-invasive plants.

Capacity-Building at the Top: Board Development

In addition to capacity-building projects directly related to program activities, ESF organizations also undertook efforts to strengthen their governance bodies to fulfill their roles and responsibilities more effectively. Exhibit 4-3 provides the types of board development capacity-building projects ESF organizations undertook.

Exhibit 4-3:
ESF Capacity-Building Projects to Strengthen the Board of Directors
 (n=12)



Organizations that focused on board recruitment successfully attracted new members with specific desired qualifications including needed skills and demographic diversity. Several organizations brought on new board members who represent the communities in which they sought or were beginning to expand services. Most also pursued and found board members with fundraising expertise. Through these recruitment processes, ESF organizations also report the board as a whole has become reinvigorated.

ESF-supported board trainings focused on fundraising. These organizations aimed to increase the board’s skill and comfort with fundraising and ambassadorial responsibilities for their organizations. Through board retreats, organizations revisited their missions, reviewed long-term plans, and developed new strategic plans.

By clarifying board member roles and responsibilities, ESF organizations maximize the potential of the board, coming to agreement on expectations and finding the best way to draw upon strengths. For some organizations, the process involved individual meetings between the board chair and each board member to discuss and establish expectations. Other organizations developed customized job descriptions to help define expectations. Through these processes, organizations have the opportunity to improve the overall functioning of the board and shift its role as the organization evolves.

Building Learning Organizations: Increasing the Use of Evaluation for Internal Program Feedback and External Communications

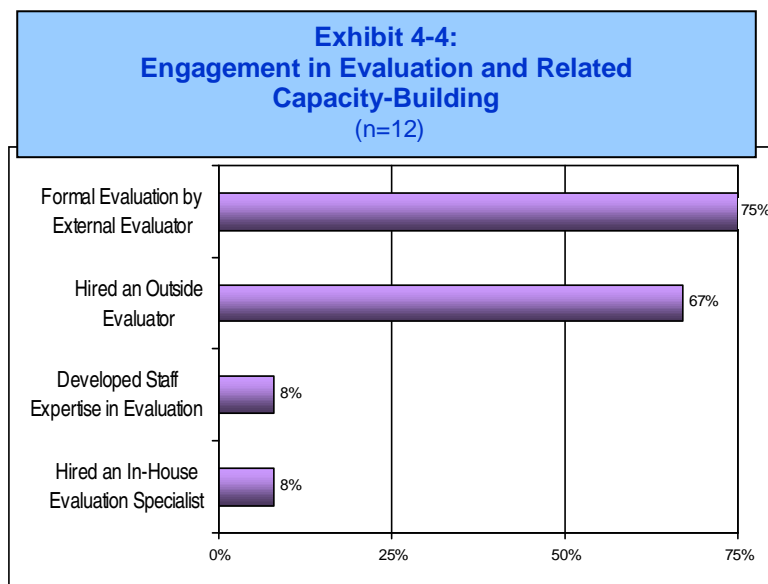
Evaluation for EE organizations has been a central challenge within the field. There traditionally has been little enthusiasm for formal evaluation among EE providers. Many organization leaders are environmental educators with years of direct experience, and they have strong intuition about what

makes a good program. They know when people enjoy themselves, and they have seen firsthand the science learning and the growth of environmental ethics. At the same time, EE has not been an area in which formal evaluators have typically concentrated. Consequently there has been a dearth of tools and methods for evaluating EE. With a lack of both supply and demand, EE evaluation within environmental organizations has historically been rare.

And yet evaluation is integral to excellence in EE, because EE providers need to have a deep understanding about how programs are – and may not be – attaining desired outcomes for participant learning and behavior change. It is only by receiving the feedback that evaluation provides that program designers can elaborate and adjust their program models so that desired outcomes can be attained. In addition, evaluation can help organizations meet the challenge of fundraising, as current and potential funders demand proof that programs are effective at producing desired outcomes. Formal evaluations are the best way to provide this evidence of effectiveness.

The Center supported efforts to promote evaluation among ESF cohort members. These investments have demonstrated significant return: nine organizations have made impressive strides in building their internal evaluation capacity. In practice, this has meant that:

- A professional evaluator has carried out a formal program evaluation (often for the first time in organization history);
- Evaluators have built internal capacity by developing tailored instruments and/or by training staff;
- Evaluation has taken on a critical role in the program development process; and
- Management and line staff have nurtured a “culture of inquiry” across the organization.



Nine of the ESF organizations had one or more formal evaluations carried out by a professional evaluator; eight of the organizations hired an outside evaluator, one hired an in-house senior evaluation specialist, and one developed staff expertise in evaluation. Evaluators have helped to promote buy-in among staff members. Staff members at the organizations have found that applying an evaluation framework to program design can help them to surface their often tacit ideas about what results they want for their participants, and their assumptions about how those results can best be brought about. This helps staff to be far more intentional about program design.

Evaluators, with input from staff, have built internal evaluation capacity by developing tools that allow organizations to measure the effects of program participation. Along with a new framework for addressing program design, employing such metrics has allowed staff to gain a deeper and more systematic understanding of the ways in which their programs are most successful, and also where

they can improve. One executive director said, “We had our first-ever non-anecdotal teacher evaluation that has given us some great information [about our programs].” This has added a whole new dimension to program feedback and design; organizations have reported that evaluation has helped them to “monitor and choose programs better.”

Several executive directors have characterized the building of internal evaluation capacity as a fundamental shift within the organization. They have seen their staff adopting a “culture of inquiry,” which pushes them to “take a serious look at whether we’re as good as we think we are.”

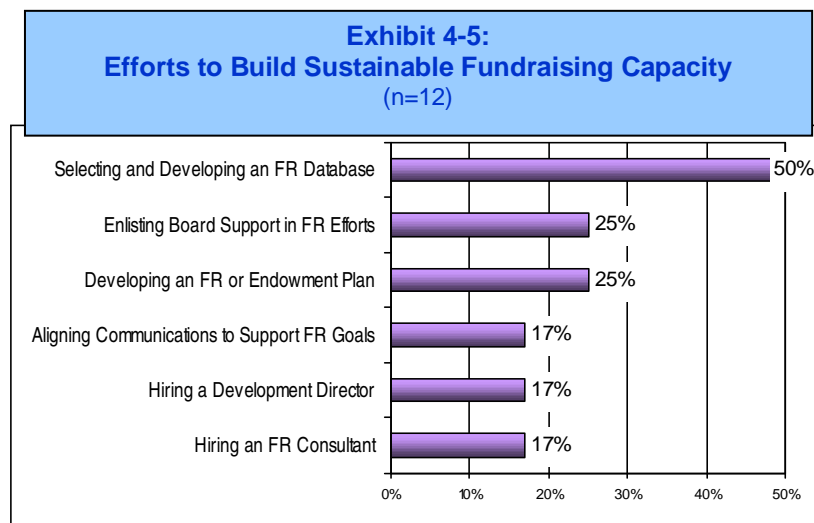
Promoting the Mission while Building Capacity and Sustainability: Fundraising, Communications, and Outreach

As with most nonprofits, ESF cohort organizations perennially face the challenge of ensuring financial sustainability. At the same time, internal resources and attention tend to flow to programs because programs link so immediately to the organization mission. For many cohort members, ESF provided an opportunity to concentrate on building sustainable fundraising capacity. Many also turned attention to communications and outreach: tasks and functions which support fiscal health as well through increasing its visibility to potential funders and clients.

The ability to effectively fundraise depends on visibility, and visibility in turn depends on how effectively an organization can communicate its mission and do outreach to the community. Communications and outreach are often in the service of fundraising, but they are also key to those programs that provide revenue income. And beyond the direct ability of communication strategies to support fundraising, by raising the visibility of an organization (and thus bringing the organization to the attention of possible donors), communications and outreach often lead in unexpected ways to new fundraising opportunities. The fundraising story of the ESF cohort reflects the ways that communications and outreach lead to increased access to funds both through intentional strategies *and* serendipity.

Building Sustainable Fundraising Capacity

Five ESF organizations had an explicit goal with respect to fundraising. With ESF planning and investments the focus was not directly on raising money in the short term, but on building sustainable fundraising capacity for the long term. To build fundraising capacity, these organizations focused on dedicated personnel, planning, technology, and board support, as summarized in Exhibit 4-5.



In partnership with the Center staff, organizations identified their most important fundraising capacity needs and then set about building capacity in those areas. They were careful not to spread their energies too thin by attacking

all fronts at once. Instead they focused on key areas needing work. The organizations that needed to align fundraising with communications did that, and those that needed to concentrate on a plan before they acquired and developed donor databases prioritized mapping out their strategy. At the end of ESF, these cohort organizations have embarked on their fundraising plans and have shown greater ability to solicit and receive donations.

Because messaging is fundamental to fundraising, two ESF organizations took a step back to coordinate these functions. One organization did a great deal of work upfront with communications staff to align messaging for their organization with their fundraising. As part of this alignment work, they also connected program staff with fundraising staff (these had previously been disconnected). The other organization made the decision to put a major donor campaign on hold until the communications plan had been finalized.

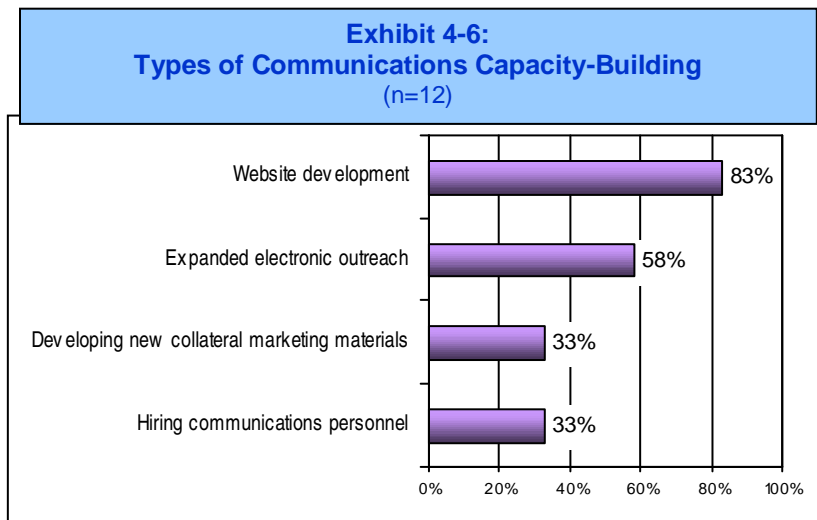
Two ESF organizations hired new personnel to focus on fundraising, one in a consulting capacity and the other into a permanent position. The new development director systematized the fundraising process and managed the development of a new donor database. The consultant helped the other organization to purchase a database that was appropriate for that particular organization, develop the individual donor program, and to populate the database.

Four of the organizations selected and began to work with new fundraising technology. They used databases to manage donors and prospective donors, and to track grants. These proved to be a boon not only in terms of managing their fundraising efforts, but also in terms of identifying potential donor segments.

Communications and Outreach

As discussed above, many ESF organizations worked on their communications capacity. This has taken the form of hiring people for communications positions, website development, electronic outreach, and enhancing collateral marketing materials, as shown in Exhibit 4-6 below.

Strides in this area have had effects on other areas of capacity. Better communications have meant that ESF organizations could achieve better outreach results, and they have sometimes generated opportunities for organizations to take advantage of unexpected funding sources.



Five cohort organizations devoted part of their ESF capacity building efforts to website development. Website development has not, of course, been only about communications and outreach – but it has often been in the service of program enhancement (for example by making

materials downloadable for teachers and students). However, website enhancements have increased the ability of organizations to attract new members, new volunteers, and new program participants. While website development is a focused way to build communications capacity, often the “wins” in communications pertained to the stature that organizations were gaining in the field due to their programs. In these cases, a “virtuous cycle” was set in motion by which new visibility led to additional visibility, which in turn could mean access to new fundraising opportunities and a greater ability to look attractive to new members or program participants.

“[Website development] helps the entire organization. It attracts highly qualified people, it impresses parents and administrators. It exceptionally represents the program and brings in people to the program.”

-ESF Cohort Member

One example of this is an ESF organization that concentrated on reaching a larger audience with a high-quality program, and every 6th grader in one city’s school district participated in the program. This meant that the parents of every 6th grader heard about the program year after year, and so – as the executive director put it – there was a “very high penetration of key constituencies.” As a result, the program got coverage in a major local newspaper, and a family foundation became interested. The resulting visibility led to additional funding opportunities for this organization.

Another cohort member got funding from ESF to operate programs at a Baylands location. A local weekly paper wrote up the story, and soon the executive director got a call from a foundation saying that they had read about the new programs. This foundation wanted the organization to apply for multi-year funding to support the new operations.

Three ESF organizations hired new communications directors. ESF funding either helped to pay the salary for the position, or else to hire the search firm. In all three cases, these new personnel were able to increase visibility of the organization and create communication strategies.

For one organization in particular, the new communication director was able to do a great deal to raise the organization’s visibility in the field. The mission of this organization is to bring together environmental and private sector interests

“[An ESF goal] was to raise visibility. We had talked about it for years, but nothing worked. In the last 18 months, we have turned a corner. Now we know we can get press – now we decide which press we want.”

-ESF Cohort Member

to promote environmentally sustainable business practices. This mission is greatly facilitated by a high profile and the organization did very careful messaging to appeal to its audiences. Although they have had difficulties being visible in the past, during the past two years their number of media hits has increased remarkably. The executive director for this organization gives a great deal of credit to ESF for their newfound success in gaining visibility.

V. Conclusions and Implications: The Effects of ESF Beyond Building the Capacity of Individual Organizations

As we have seen in previous chapters, Environmental Solutions Forum (ESF) has done an exemplary job of building the capacity of the individual organizations that participated. Yet the value of ESF will extend beyond the first-order effects of increased capacity and organizational effectiveness; it also has a great deal to offer in terms of improved environmental education (EE) for the region and in terms of contributions to the *field* of capacity-building. ESF can be field-building in two ways: first, by positioning cohort members to disseminate best practices of EE and best practices of evaluation to other EE providers; and second, by contributing to knowledge about how to use high engagement philanthropy to effectively build capacity.

The Potential of ESF to Change the Face of Environmental Education in Northern California through the Dissemination of Best Practices

Participation in ESF helped organizations move forward on a wide range of capacity building goals. In pursuing these goals, however, actions taken by ESF cohort members may also have consequences that go beyond the boundaries of individual organizations and their programs. In particular, ESF may prove to be a catalyst for changing the face of EE in Northern California.

Participation in ESF has helped cohort members become subject matter experts of excellence in the practice of EE. Their expertise has come both from being exposed to the latest scholarly thinking about EE best practices, and also from the extensive experience the cohort has accumulated with very intentional approaches to improving their EE in order to align programs with best practices. Their expertise, in all probability, will have a ripple effect on the field because of their visibility within it. The group of organizations selected to participate in ESF were already leaders in the field – and their stature has grown over the course of ESF. They may serve, then, as models to other similar organizations, and in this way they will be able to effectively disseminate EE best practices.

Dissemination of best practices will also happen naturally as collaboration continues to grow. ESF encouraged and promoted collaboration among cohort members, and with other organizations outside of ESF. As networks grow, they become more

“valuable” – that is, with every new link they expand the access of network members to resources that each network node provides. Their value as a source of resources and information makes them more attractive to potential network members.

“When a sector’s coming together and sitting around a table, it’s like coming to critical mass. We’re not quite at the 100th monkey yet, but stepping toward the monkey.”

-ESF Cohort Member

There is another way that ESF may come to influence the field as a whole, and this complements the collaboration in pursuit of EE best practices. Evaluation has historically been a challenge for the field, with demand for evaluation of EE low, and the supply of effective tools for measuring effectiveness correspondingly low. However, almost every cohort member engaged in evaluation during ESF, and many of them moved from a position of skepticism to one of advocacy. Again, because ESF organizations have stature within the field, they may serve as models to other

organizations and inspire them to pursue evaluations of their own. At the same time, the evaluations that have been performed at the participating organizations have in fact begun to build an inventory of metrics of the field that are usable by others.

Furthermore, to the extent that the practice of evaluation does become more common among organizations providing EE, this in turn will feed back into improving EE programs. It is only by receiving evaluation feedback that program designers can elaborate and adjust their program models so that desired outcomes can be attained. ESF cohort members have remarked on the ways in which their systematic evaluations have allowed them and their staff to gain a deeper and more systematic understanding of the ways in which their programs are most successful, and also where they can improve.

Thus, the effect of ESF could be to increase both supply and demand for evaluation, and it could become a more routine practice. Increased evaluation of programs among EE providers will continue to improve and hone programs, as evaluation provides program feedbacks and allows organizations to become more effective at reaching their goals for program participants.

“[ESF] has ... opened my eyes to the field of metrics and evaluation and opened my eyes to a broader view of evaluation..... Also the group experience of us saying this is important and our field has not done an adequate job. I want my organization to do its part to make our sector better.”

-ESF Cohort Member

ESF as a Model of Effective Capacity-Building through High-Engagement Philanthropy

ESF also makes a number of contributions to the knowledge of how funders can design initiatives to build organizational capacity effectively. First, the evidence is clear that organizations *did* emerge from the initiative with greater organizational capacity as a result of participation in ESF, and that greater capacity led to greater organizational effectiveness to programs that were more in line with EE best practices. What we argue here is that ESF was able to generate such positive results for two reasons – first because it was designed around the principles of high-engagement philanthropy; and second because it executed this high-engagement philanthropy particularly well. Below we make this argument from two perspectives – first from the perspective of the grantees themselves, and second from our perspective as an outside observer of what were the critical success factors for ESF.

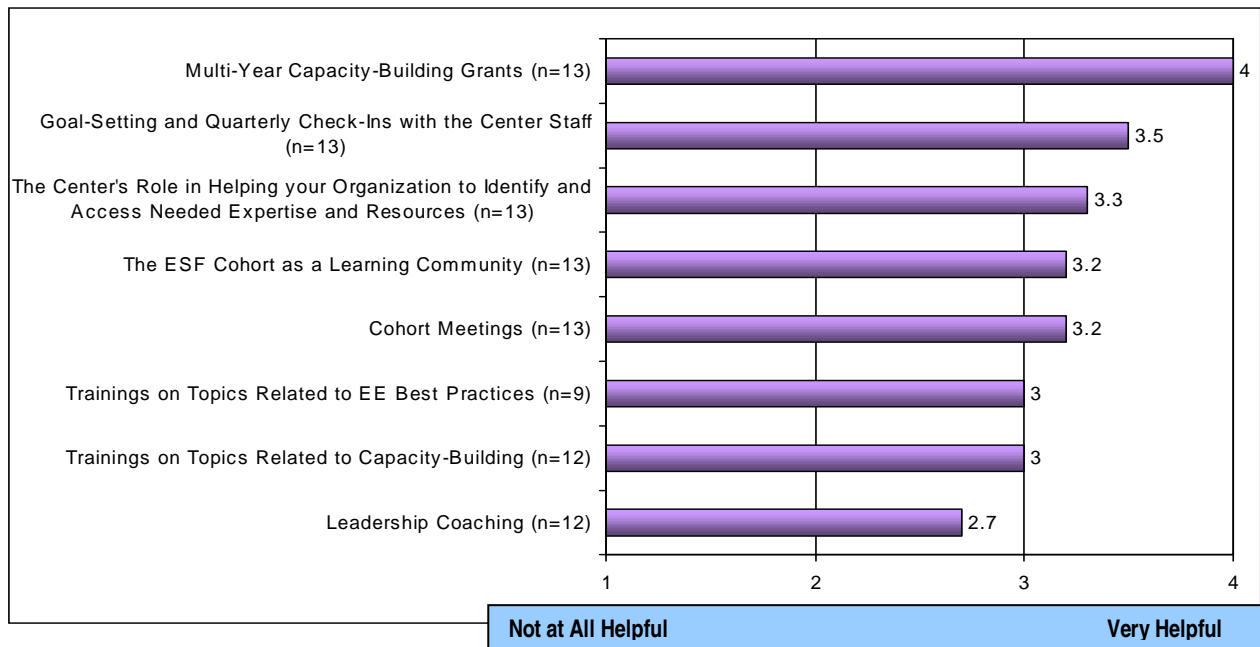
“I think our organization has steadily improved at all levels in terms of being focused, really choosing priorities, setting goals, being accountable for what we actually accomplish. And when we don’t accomplish the results we were intending, really look[ing] at why, and not repeat the same mistakes.... And I think in the process we’ve just gotten better at what we do and the venture philanthropy approach has just helped us do that.”

-ESF Cohort Member

Cohort Member Ratings of ESF Components

In final evaluation interviews, participating executive directors rated eight components of the ESF model in terms of how helpful each was to achieving their capacity-building goals. Exhibit 5-1 below provides the results.

**Exhibit 5-1:
Cohort Member Ratings of ESF Components**



All executive directors agree that the multi-year capacity-building grants were extremely helpful. While this is predictable, cohort members insisted on clarifying that the reason why multi-year grants are so important is because they allow organizations to develop a long-term capacity-building plan and implement it knowing that funding will be available to do so. This assurance freed organizations to expand their thinking and develop ambitious goals.

“They (the Center) are really invested in us as an organization rather than in a particular project. They try to understand what the organization’s needs are, and they would provide funds for things that aren’t as glamorous. That kind of support is worth more than the dollar value of the program grant: you can do so much more with it, from an organizational capacity standpoint, because it is leveraged.”
-ESF Cohort Member

It is noteworthy that cohort members rated the goal-setting and quarterly check-in processes with the Center for Venture Philanthropy (the Center) staff as highly as they did. It would be easy to imagine that executive directors would resent the time these conversations took or criticize them as intrusive on the funder’s part. On the contrary, as elaborated below, executive directors appreciated how these meetings provided focus, helped keep things on track, and created a regular space for them and the Center staff to make connections across projects and with other opportunities to the organization’s benefit.

Executive directors had mixed comments about the leadership coaching component, not because they did not feel it was valuable, but because some preferred the group format over one-on-one, and vice versa. Regardless of format preference, executive directors voiced a range of benefits the

“Every ED needs a sounding board, needs a resource and a reality check. And they’ve provided that...it made so much sense to me as a logical progression: ‘We’re going to create capacity for your org, but your organization needs to have an ED whose capacity is built. [...] It’s not performance coaching, it’s capacity-sustaining coaching.’
-ESF Cohort Member

coaching component provided:

- The opportunity to think through issues in (close to) real time as they arose in their organizations;
- Allowing time to step back, reflect, and process issues;
- Goal-setting and accountability;
- Hearing, in the context of small groups, how other executive directors had handled similar issues; and
- Having another way to get to know executive directors of other organizations in the small group coaching sessions.

During the final evaluation interviews, executive directors also expressed their opinions about the ways in which the Center’s venture/high engagement philanthropy model added value and how much they appreciated networking with cohort executive directors.

High-Engagement Philanthropy

The Center staff, implementing their high-engagement philanthropy model, stay in close touch with grantee partners: they act as sounding boards for ideas, and stay consistently on the lookout for opportunities to connect organizations to needed expertise and resources. In key informant interviews, cohort members focused on several ways in which they found the Center’s model to be effective in helping them to build their capacity and pursue their goals:

- The funder acts as a resource, rather than “just a check-writer,”
- The grantees are allowed flexibility in their reaching goals,
- The relationship between funder and grantee is very open and honest, and
- High engagement helps the grantee stay on track.

Below we elaborate on each of these four points.

The funder is a resource. Grantees report that the Center staff were very helpful in “thinking out loud” with them about their ideas, offering support and connecting them to resources and expertise. Throughout the initiative, the Center staff were repeatedly able to connect cohort members to people who could help them in an area of need. These resources available through the Center connections run the gamut from a pro-bono attorney who helped to negotiate a lease, to a student consultant at Kellogg School of Management who did market research, to a producer at Comcast who put one of the grantees in a Community Service Spotlight.

“[The Center is] not the faceless contributor... [We have] the ability to check in with them and tap into them as a resource. [It’s a] completely different approach to being funded.”

“[The Center staff] help to make resources readily available to us. Support from the Center and ESF is taking us to the next level.”

- ESF Cohort Members

“This grant was flexible. I focused on some things that were long-term, but then we could also address short-term needs by re-evaluating each year what our needs were. I loved the flexibility. If it turned out what I thought I should do with the money one year was not what I should do, they were very accepting of change.”

“Not everything was perfect, but we were allowed to experiment, fail, learn, and move on to accomplish great things.”

- ESF Cohort Members

The Center staff also made several connections that led to fundraising opportunities for grantees. For four organizations, connections with individual donors or grantmakers resulted in new grants; for one organization, the Center staff spoke with a funder to reinstate funding that was in jeopardy.

Grantees have flexibility in reaching their goals. With ESF grantmaking, grantees were not held to account for overly specific goals; rather, they were held to account for a general plan in building their capacity. If they needed to change course, the Center staff worked with them on how to do that most effectively. Progress is not assumed to be linear, and along the way grantees are expected to adjust to exigencies, to abandon unsuccessful strategies, and to learn.

Grantees have an open and honest relationship with the Center. Closely related to the fact that grantees are allowed flexibility in reaching their goals is the fact that their relationships with the Center were much more open and honest than are relationships with traditional funders. In key informant interviews, several say that in the traditional philanthropy mode, the grantee often does its best to communicate with the funder only about the successes and never about the struggles. But because learning and adjustment are expected as grantee and funder make their way along a nonlinear path together, grantees can be honest with the Center about any setbacks or difficulties in reaching goals.

“The benefits [of the Center model] are truth, honesty.... You’re dealing with the real world. The message coming from ESF is ‘we know it’s hard and we know it’s not perfect. We don’t want smoke and mirrors, we really want to look under the hood – we won’t punish you when we look there.’ It’s a true partnership. [...] There’s a great deal of relief in that.”

“ESF staff ... succeeded in creating an environment where we could talk about challenges as well as successes. I didn’t have to sweep things under the carpet. We could say we did not meet our quarterly goals because of X, and here is what we are doing about it. [...] The Center takes away the pressure to hide why you did not make the mark exactly.”

- ESF Cohort Members

High engagement helps the grantees stay on track. In working with grantees, the Center staff held quarterly check-in calls with them, during which the grantees would give updates on progress and detours in their ESF goals. Grantees point out that these calls helped to build the relationship, while helping to keep their organizations on track toward their goals. While it is true that grantees are allowed to change course as they build their capacity, they are also accountable for the goals that they plan for themselves in concert with the Center staff. Formalizing these at the beginning of the year and checking in about them every quarter adds the structure necessary to ensure that grantees do in fact move forward. They also give the Center the real-time information that they need to provide connections to resources and expertise at the moment when they can be most effective.

“[The Center’s] approach reinforces the need of an organization conducting itself in a way to plan, choose and deliver results.”

“The goal setting was very helpful. At the beginning of each year, we have to set the goals. I’m a big fan of getting clarity and being reflective. It’s so easy to go through life dealing with the squeaky wheels – the quarterly plans integrate the ESF goals.”

- ESF Cohort Members

Opportunities to Network with Other Executive Directors in the Field

When asked how useful they find the cohort meetings and the learning community aspect of the initiative, executive directors spoke enthusiastically about the opportunity to meet with colleagues and to get to know their counterparts from other environmental organizations in the area. The meetings give them a chance to hear about the challenges other executive directors face, and to benefit from the experiences of others. Hearing what others are doing sometimes infused new thinking into member organizations. Several also acknowledged that their collective wisdom is considerable, and that they learn a great deal just from hearing from one another.

“It is great to be around EDs with different perspectives. [It is] not the same as being around board members or regular staff.”

“The most value people typically get out of is form please fix the grammar here learning from the other programs and ESF did that really well. There was a lot of information-sharing among the different organizations.”

“EDs often fall into the ‘lonely at the top’ scenario. [...] It’s a critical support factor for me.”

- ESF Cohort Members

Evaluators’ Assessment of What Was Critical to ESF’s Success

After four years of observing the Center design and implement ESF, and three years of interacting with and visiting cohort organizations, the LaFrance Associates (LFA) evaluation team has a deep sense of what worked to make ESF a success. Not surprisingly, these critical success factors show that the ESF approach is very much in line with organizational capacity-building best practices. What experts in the field have identified as best practices include: setting direction and establishing goals, allowing sufficient time (measured in years) for capacity-building, allowing for mid-course corrections, developing peer learning networks among grantees, and establishing trust between funder and grantee. Below we provide a list of the initiative components that were especially critical and worthy of replication.

The grants are of sufficient size. To enable grantees to make good use of capacity-building funds, grants must be of meaningful size. It is often the case that the “unglamorous” work of capacity-building can be expensive – for example, grants that pay salaries high enough to attract highly-qualified human capital with the skills to develop a particular area such as fundraising or communications. The Center made grants to cohort members that were sufficient to meet critical capacity needs.

The initiative was long enough for capacity-building to truly take hold and begin to generate real returns in terms of increased organizational effectiveness. Another critical success factor of the ESF initiative was its length. Capacity is a long-term investment, usually involving foundational work within an organization. To expect rapid change is unrealistic, and the length of the initiative allowed the organizations the time they needed to see the payoff from capacity-building.

Because the cohort comprised organizations from a particular region and with similar foci on EE, it was well-positioned to become an effective learning community and a vehicle for collaboration. A primary value-add of working with a cohort of organizations is the opportunity for that cohort to become a true learning community. The Center convened organizations that shared both a geographic and topical focus, and therefore faced similar issues. Because this was the case,

executive directors could share best practices and solutions to common problems. What we heard in key informant interviews reinforces this conclusion. Most of the organizations provided EE to school-aged children and youth, and these were the organizations that rated the usefulness of the learning community most highly. The few organizations that had a slightly different take on EE (their EE was directed at business and/or policy-makers) did not feel that they had learned as much from their colleagues.

Partly due to the similarities among organizations, several collaborative relationships grew out of ESF. These relationships allow organizations to pool resources to provide more effective EE within the region, often partnering to provide complementary experiences – a central goal of the initiative. Collaboration is also in and of itself a “good” for organizations, providing the connections through which organizations can access valuable knowledge and additional resources.

The ratio of the Center staff to cohort size is very high, thus allowing the Center staff to devote sufficient energies to working with ESF cohort members. The Center provided a full-time program officer devoted to ESF, while other staff did not have to divide their attention among an undue number of projects. This meant that the Center staff had the time and energy to be highly responsive to the cohort – often available to work with cohort members as they dealt with challenges in real time, rather than hearing about these challenges after the fact.

The Center staff delivered messages about the goals of ESF (e.g. disseminating best practices in EE) consistently, yet without coercion. The “accountability for results” approach of high-engagement philanthropy could conceivably be implemented in such a way so that participating organizations see their funding held hostage to meeting their quarterly goals. The Center staff ran the initiative in a different way: they consistently put forward a vision for how organizations could build their capacity and increase the success of their EE, but they also took seriously their role as collaborator and partner and so did not force cohort members onto a specific path. This helped to keep organizations on track toward pursuing overall ESF goals, but prioritized the relationship-building between funder and grantee. As the trust grew and the Center got to know the cohort members increasingly well, the relationship became increasingly effective as a vehicle for providing capacity-building assistance and as a conduit to additional expertise and resources.

The Center gently promoted evaluation among organizations, rather than making it a requirement – their low-key approach paid off as most organizations integrated evaluation into their program planning. Promoting evaluation was a key goal of ESF. However, rather than asking all organizations to add evaluation progress to their quarterly goals, the Center staff simply promoted and encouraged evaluation among cohort members. One organization made evaluation central to its capacity-building. As the first organization shared its experience with evaluation, other ESF organizations looked to this one organization as a trusted member. The “early adopter” was able to communicate to the others the value of evaluation, and most other organizations eventually brought in a professional evaluator to perform program evaluation.

The openness of the Center staff to course corrections enabled the trust that cohort members felt toward the Center staff. As we reported, grantees felt relieved to be able to “skip the spin” with the Center staff. They felt that they could be completely honest in letting the Center staff know how they were doing, rather than feeling that they needed to put the best face on everyone in order for the funder to feel that it had gotten a sufficient return on its investment. In less able hands, this trust might not have emerged – but the *modus operandi* of the Center from the

beginning was one of expecting that capacity-building would not follow a linear path. This expectation of nonlinearity took pressure off of the grantee to “look good” to the funder, and let cohort members know that the Center was serious about helping them to do the hard work of learning from mistakes and growing in new directions.

Other efforts within the field to promote EE evaluation created synergy with ESF’s own efforts along the same lines. During the first half of the ESF initiative Blueprint R&D, a research and consulting organization in San Francisco, was running the Bay Area EE Evaluation (BAEEE) collaborative. Many ESF cohort members joined the collaborative, and their participation provided them with new knowledge about how to use evaluation in the context of EE. This gave ESF organizations an additional “push” toward evaluation – both because it provided knowledge of evaluation and access to some tools with which to carry it out, and also because the BAEEE helped to legitimize evaluation as a practice that is relevant and critical to EE organizations.

Quarterly check-ins and the availability of the Center staff meant that the Center was able to hear about issues as they arose and to connect cohort members – in a timely manner – to the resources and expertise they needed. Often what an organization needs is access to a resource or expertise at critical junctures. Funders frequently have information which can provide organizations with this access, but they may not hear about grantee needs in time to provide assistance. Because of frequent check-ins, and because the Center staff was so available to grantees, the Center was often able to make a connection just at the moment that the organization needed it. The serendipity of making these connections proved to be critical to helping organizations move forward in their capacity-building.

Conclusion

The effects of ESF are wide-ranging. Individual participating organizations have built their internal organizational capacity and have made strides in their ability to provide more effective EE in Northern California. More individuals are being reached by EE, and more people are participating in the type of EE that is more likely to bring about attitudinal and behavioral change. In addition, private sector firms engaging with ESF organizations are instituting changes in business practices to reduce their negative impact on the environment.

Not only are individual organizations and their clients changing, but we also see promise for change in the field of EE as a whole. ESF cohort members have become subject matter experts in EE best practices and in the ability of evaluation to generate valuable feedback for continuous program improvement. At the same time, they have gained stature within the field and within their respective EE subfields. Increased stature and visibility, in turn, increase their ability to influence similar organizations and to disseminate the best practices that they have put into effect within their own organizations.

The results of ESF also contribute to our knowledge about using high-engagement philanthropy to build the capacity of organizations. The particular ways in which the Center staff put high-engagement philanthropy into practice maximized the probability of success. To begin with, ESF was of sufficient length, and allocated grants of sufficient size, to enable organizations to put meaningful plans into action and to have enough time for their investments to take hold and begin to generate real returns. Secondly, the Center staff held the cohort members accountable for results,

and helped to keep organizations on track through MOUs, carefully thought-out plans with specific quarterly goals, and quarterly check-in calls to discuss progress and setbacks. Third, while taking the “accountability for results” model seriously, the Center staff did not rigidly hold organizations to *specific* goals, but took seriously the real-world need for course corrections. This flexibility introduced an openness into the funder-grantee relationship that made it easy for grantees to be honest with the Center staff about how they were truly doing, and where ESF could provide assistance. Fourth, because the Center staff was able to devote so much staff time to ESF, cohort members reaped the benefits of individualized attention.

The honest funder-grantee relationship, along with the close contact between grantees and the Center staff afforded by dedicated staff and quarterly check-ins, meant that the Center could live up to its goal of acting as a *true partner*. They got to know the grantees extraordinarily well, and got to hear – in approximately real time – what issues the grantees were facing. This meant that the Center staff was well-positioned to often provide what the grantees needed at the moment they needed it to quickly handle challenges, or to take advantage of opportunities that arose unexpectedly.

The positive results of ESF – including internal organizational change and an improvement in EE that will continue to create ripple effects within the field – provide evidence that high-engagement philanthropy is an effective method for working with grantees in a way that maximizes the return on funders’ investments. In addition, the particular way in which the Center staff administered the ESF initiative should serve as a model to the field of how best to put high-engagement philanthropy into practice.

Appendices

Appendix A: Initiative Logic Models & Theory of Change

- Center for Venture Philanthropy's Concert in the Park Logic Model
- Environmental Solutions Forum Logic Model
- The Environmental Solutions Forum Theory of Change

Appendix B: Evaluation Results Tables

- Institute for Conservation Leadership Data Summary Tables
- Benchmarking Best Practices in Environmental Education Data Summary Tables

Appendix C: Evaluation Data Collection Instruments

- Institute for Conservation Leadership Benchmarking Workbook
- Benchmarking Best Practices in Environmental Education
- Initiative-Wide Evaluation: Environmental Education Program Tables
- Final Initiative Evaluation Executive Director Interview Protocol
- Environmental Solutions Forum Final Evaluation Key Informant Interview Protocol:
Center for Venture Philanthropy Staff

Appendix D: Cohort Information

- Environmental Solutions Forum Cohort Meeting Discussion Topics