

Achieving Diversity in The Environmental Education Community

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The United States is in the midst of a transition from a predominately white population to a society composed of diverse racial and ethnic groups from all over the world. These demographic changes have critical implications for the field of environmental education. The growth of Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American, and Native American populations has diversified the racial makeup of our schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, creating an awareness of the need to reflect on the needs of a multiracial and multicultural society.

In 2002 the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) Board adopted a position statement on diversity and accepted a set of recommended actions for both diversifying NAAEE and helping to diversify the field of environmental education. The committee identified six actions that NAAEE should take to diversify itself as well as two actions to help diversify the field. Action # 7 called for a survey of state, provincial and regional EE Associations to “assess their level of inclusion, values of diversity and multiculturalism.” During the summer of 2003, the authors conducted a survey of the state associations designed to: a) Assess the level of diversity represented in Affiliate’s board and membership, b) Determine what actions have been taken to address diversity, and c) Assess what is needed to achieve diversity within the Affiliates.

Selected Survey Summaries

What is the Level of Diversity Reflected on Affiliate Organization’s Board of Directors?

Of the 21 states that responded to the survey, a total of only 17 minority board members were represented: six African Americans, three Asians, three Native Americans and three listed as “other”. Most affiliate organizations had either none or one minority represented on their board of directors. No Hispanics were represented on an affiliate board among those that responded to the survey.

What is the level of diversity reflected in the Affiliate Organization’s membership?

The question of membership diversity was difficult to address because most states do not have their membership categorized by race. Most estimates of racial diversity were very low, estimating between 0 – 20% of their membership is from a minority background.

What is needed for Affiliate Organizations to achieve diversity?

The Affiliate organizations perceive the first priority toward achieving diversity as a need for a “role model” association. Additionally, other needs include scholarship money for minorities to attend events, and training on strategies for accessing diverse cultures. Of the states that responded to the survey, California and Arizona were identified as each having components closest to providing a model for how to achieve diversity within an EE organization.

Survey Recommendations

Make a commitment toward achieving diversity. If your board is to achieve diversity, your president, nominating committee and membership must believe that diversity is important and that time, effort and resources should be dedicated towards achieving the goal of diversity. There should be a plan developed towards reach this goal. In California, they learned to start from the workforce and build up, making efforts to provide opportunities to minority populations. In their words, “Diverse environmental education workforce = Diverse organization.”

Look within your organization. Is the community reputation of your organization one that would cause people from diverse racial and ethnic communities to want to be involved? How relevant is your organization to the diverse populations of your community? If you don’t know the answers to these questions, make an effort to find them out.

Put your commitment to diversity in writing. Several states have put their commitment to diversity in writing. In Colorado, their organizational strategic plan includes building partnerships with organizations that represent

minorities as a priority. Furthermore, they actively recruit candidates that represent racial diversity to their board of directors, membership, and staff/intern positions. In Arizona a specific recruitment plan is in place for new member organizations representing Arizona's Native American Tribes, Urban League, disability organizations, and Hispanic community members. In Ohio, commitment to diversity is an explicit component of the matrix used by their nominating committee to identify and recruit new board members.

Network, Network, Network. Search for potential new board members by talking to friends and colleagues both within the states current environmental education network and from outside the network. Learn about all of the groups that make up your community. In Nebraska, environmental education programs are promoted on a statewide basis, including reservations and urban areas that are largely minority. Nebraska has been successful with outreach efforts to other organizations that serve largely minority audiences, such as the Urban League. In Oregon, one program that was particularly successful was planned and organized through a local office of the NAACP. Spread the word that your organization is looking for leaders from diverse communities.

OVERALL SURVEY SUMMARY

Results from this survey indicate that there is an interest in diversifying the field of Environmental Education yet there are many obstacles. Although organizations attempt to advertise on a statewide basis and specifically target minority audiences, there is simply a lack of people of color working within the field of Environmental Education. Most boards would like to achieve greater diversity among their board membership, but have had limited success in achieving diversity. Many organizations have a non-discriminatory policy but not a policy that specifically addresses diversity. Organizations that have had success achieving diversity have pro-actively recruited members, have written recruitment strategies and specifically target minority audiences.