Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education
Member Listening Tour Report

Prepared by Blair Young
Cultivation Center
March 2018
OVERVIEW:
In November 2017, Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (CAEE) hired Cultivation Center, LLC. to conduct a third-party member listening tour on behalf of the organization. The overarching goal of the listening event was to gather member insights that will inform CAEE’s future vision for the major focus of the organization- member engagement. Leading into the listening tour the key curiosities of the organization about its membership were:

- What are the true needs of CAEE members- beyond networking opportunities?
- How do members see CAEE meeting those needs?
- What are the most pressing problems facing CAEE members?
- How do members see CAEE solving those problems?
- Will meeting member needs and solving member problems build CAEE’s value?
- How can CAEE build more value into membership?
- How can CAEE communicate its value to members?

KEY FINDINGS:

- CAEE is valued, respected, and **needed** by its members.
- The most high-value offering from CAEE to its members is networking and professional development opportunities.
- Many members desire a stronger “big picture” or visionary approach and presence from CAEE across the state.
- CAEE can increase its value by enacting big picture strategy through shared messaging on behalf of EE and through bolstered EE advocacy with the department of education.
- Many members advise that CAEE needs to “modernize” its brand and its use of online technologies in order to better communicate its value to members and to the greater community.

METHOD:
After an initial interview with Katie Navin, CAEE’s executive director, Cultivation Center designed a 3-part research agenda to gather qualitative data from CAEE stakeholders including staff members, board members, and organizational members. Research components were input interviews with key stakeholders, a focus group with organizational members, and a survey of organizational members.
Initial questions for each component were developed by Cultivation Center and were reviewed and approved by CAEE’s executive director. Cultivation Center then designed and implemented each component, with the exception of the survey which was deployed by CAEE using their emailing database. In advance of releasing the survey, Cultivation Center coached CAEE to use the survey as a tool to increase membership during their January 2018 membership drive. Therefore CAEE positioned the survey as a “member only” survey in hope of motivating existing members to renew their membership, non-members to become members, and unsure members to clarify their status. A goal of this tactic was to ensure that survey results were not muddled by member and nonmember perspectives. Additionally, Cultivation Center requested that CAEE’s executive director identify and invite stakeholders to participate in both the input interviews as well as in the focus group. Ultimately, informant anonymity was insured when Cultivation Center conducted input interviews over the phone and by facilitating the in-person focus group.

INPUT INTERVIEW RESULTS:

During the months of December 2017 and January 2018 a total of 10 key stakeholders participated in structured input interviews on behalf of CAEE. Among the 10 interviewees two were CAEE staff members, two were CAEE board members, and six were engaged stakeholders representing current member organizations from across the state of Colorado. Each phone interview lasted 30 minutes long. Participants listened to a brief description of the purpose of the call as well as an assurance of anonymity. They were then given an opportunity to ask clarifying questions before beginning the interview. Full transcripts from the input interviews can be read in Appendix A which is included at the close of this report. Interview questions included:

1) What member needs do you think CAEE best addresses?
2) What do you see as the key challenges facing CAEE, moving forward?
3) In terms of member services, what do you see as CAEE’s top three priorities right now?
4) In terms of member services, what would you like to see CAEE stop, start, and continue?
5) If CAEE is on the right track, how will you know?
6) What is your biggest need as an environmental educator?
7) Is there anything that I didn’t ask you that you think it’s important for me to know?

The overall tone of the input interviews was positive in that all participants highly value CAEE and its work in Colorado. However, many of the interviewees had strong opinions about the ways in which CAEE can operate in a way that will increase its value to members. The ideas in this area ranged from the practical to the grandiose- one interviewee was particularly visionary...
in their feedback. Following are six key themes identified in the input interviews—presented in no particular order.

**Modernize CAEE’s online communications:**

Several interviewees stressed ways that CAEE should modernize its communications as a way to elevate its credibility in the overall community and as a direct member benefit. One interviewee indicated the importance of the website as "a critical member resource and portal". Another suggested that the website should be an "electronic platform as a bridge for the community to resources and to one another".

Specific recommendations include:
- Overhaul CAEE’s website to be more inline with current online resources;
- Better organize the website content and navigation;
- Create easier access to grants and employment on the website;
- Adopt user technology that supports more online interaction among members;
- Add more webinars—could the certification program be moved online;
- Drop the online database that relies on members for updating—it is out of date.

On the topic of CAEE supported online databases, one interviewee commented that "the searchable database where educators can find a CME speaker, it's not really strong and I've never found or had anyone find us through that. It's getting antiquated. Maybe dollars could be spent on a new tool that better attracts teachers?"

**Strengthen CAEE's relationship with schools and the department of education:**

Interviewees representing organizations that are direct providers of EE described frustrations with navigating school system dynamics as well as a desire for EE to become a higher priority for the department of education. They feel that CAEE can be an advocate for EE in schools at both the local and state level. From the interviewees there is a resounding call for CAEE to "Be at the table with the department of education".

Other specific requests include:
- An area of growth for CAEE is providing advocacy for EE in Colorado’s teaching standards;
- Champion EE’s holistic approach to education (messaging);
- Helping organizations make connections with school districts—Can CAEE play a convening role at the school district level?
Increase CAEE’s involvement in diversity and inclusion initiatives:

A number of interviewees identified diversity and inclusion in EE as both a national and statewide concern. They expressed that they want to CAEE to give momentum to diversifying the field to better represent the diversity of Colorado’s general population. In other words so that, “EE is not just a white enterprise and is more representative of diversity in our state.”

Key related insights are:

- Organizational staff who travel to Washington to attend inclusiveness trainings—“higher level kinds of things that CAEE doesn’t put on”;
- Reach out to new groups coming into outdoor recreation to become CAEE members—especially those that promote diversity, equity and inclusion - like the Colorado chapter of Latino Outdoors.

Leverage networking and professional development opportunities:

Opportunities to connect and grow through networking and professional development events is a theme threaded across all of the interviews conducted. This offering seems to be the heart of CAEE member benefits and is seen as highly valuable by member organizations. A veteran member observed how important CAEE networking events were in connecting her to the community when she was new to the field but that “It seems like they used to have more opportunities for members to get together and they don’t seem to have as many of those social gatherings very frequently. The membership doesn’t get together as much anymore. I remember going to a BBQ for example. It would be fun to meet for lunch. These meet-ups would be a great service to the members”. Additionally, another interviewee commented that “if CAEE starts providing better services that help people grow as professionals, they’ll be able to raise the price of membership. But right now we don’t get much out of membership other than a reduced cost to attend the conference”.

Specific recommendations and requests include:

- Offer more high level trainings and certification at statewide conferences to take “a lot” off of member organization’s plates;
- Ensure that CAEE is developing content around relevant and diverse topics;
- Offer training to keep up with use of technology in the field;
- Increase marketing about professional development, specifically webinar opportunities;
• Education, training, and certification ("it’s like having a masters") gives stature to EE;
• Organize more specific community engagement oriented events to help members feel like they are part of a community.

Focus on the big picture:

Converse to providing the direct service of networking and training opportunities, many interviewees stressed that CAEE should focus on EE messaging/advocacy across the state and work to keep members in touch with national trends in EE- big picture stuff. One interviewee summed this up in a series of critical questions including, “Where is the statewide marketing campaign about the importance of EE? Where’s the streamlined message on behalf of all of our organizations? Where is the fundraising that we can all benefit from? What are the best practices that are happening across the country? Why aren’t we bringing in leaders from across the country?” The interviewees who commented on this theme shared visionary recommendations such as:

• It is a benefit to organizational members for CAEE to “keep apprised” of national EE trends because practitioners don’t have time to track that information;
• CAEE needs to elevate its profile across the state;
• Colorado should have a collective goal for every child in the state the participate in an outdoor education experience;
• Increase outreach with the public health community to leveraging the connection between public health and the health benefits of spending time outdoors;

Beware of mission drift:

Some interviewees were passionate about their perception of CAEE’s mission drift. They see this as undermining CAEE’s overall impact and as a tendency that degrades CAEE’s capacity to provide member services. In the spirit of focusing on the big picture one interviewee commented that, “CAEE needs to seek out contracts that serve the entire field rather than pick up ‘random’ contracts that fall into its lap”. These, and other interviewees, had distinct criticisms and specific suggestions about mission relevant projects that CAEE could champion to benefit EE organizations across the state:

• When CAEE chases grants “to get money” members question: Why are we doing this project? What is the benefit to the EE provider or the field?;
- CAEE should be more strategic in terms of picking up contracts that will really drive the EE field- like raising money to develop an evaluation process that would benefit the field overall.

**FOCUS GROUP RESULTS:**

In January 2018 Cultivation Center facilitated a semi-structured focus group that was attended by six organizational members, one of whom was also an individual member. The focus group lasted 1.5 hours and was attended by a facilitator and a note taker. At the opening of the session confidentiality was established among participant members and facilitators. A few prompt questions were developed in advance of the focus group and emerging questions were also asked based participant contributions during the focus group. Questions that were included in the focus group were:

1) Why are you a CAEE member?
2) Which CAEE member resources do you currently use? What makes them valuable to you and/or your organization?
3) What member needs do you think CAEE best addresses?
4) In terms of member services, what do you think see as CAEE’s greatest challenges?
6) If you were recruiting someone to join CAEE, describe the next version of CAEE. What's the value?

**Value of CAEE**

The first three questions were designed to understand **how members’ assign meaning and value to their CAEE membership.** A key insight from conversation around these questions is that being a CAEE member is a “badge of honor” and that there is a sense of pride in CAEE being “our professional organization- there aren’t many of them.” And that having a statewide professional organization that represents the EE voice at the legislative level is valuable to organizational members. Additionally, CAEE is valued as an entity that holds the broader institutional memory of EE in the state that can provide guidance for a statewide vision for EE. Similar to a finding from the input interviews, focus group members echoed the value of CAEE’s networking and professional development opportunities. Connecting and learning from colleagues, including sharing best practices, and having a place to send new arrivals to EE or to Colorado all make these events valuable to members. Another way that CAEE builds meaning for members is the ways in which the organization elevates EE through honors and awards in
the field. Members’ value CAEE’s acknowledgement of individuals and organizations who “do this work well”. They also perceive these awards as creating value for EE in the greater community.

Supporting insights include:

- Trust that CAEE is keeping a pulse on state standards and push for standards and answer questions on behalf of the EE field;
- CAEE’s existence helps to formalize EE in Colorado;
- Individual membership is, in part, to support EE in the state;
- Trainings and workshops are highly valuable, including capacity building workshops and bringing in “outside” instructors;
  - Environmental justice workshop:
    - The trainer was wonderful;
    - Participants felt like they were part of something that was growing;
    - Experienced a turn toward diversity;
    - Multiple series workshop led to relationship development;
- The conference offers:
  - Networking;
  - Great sessions for people new to the field;
  - Important touches in between conferences.
- CAEE staff as a support resource is a benefit;
- It is important to have a “touch” with CAEE at least once every 3 months;
- CAEE provides regular information offering a jobs clearinghouse and funding sources, specifically mentioned;
- CAEE can provide professional development opportunities through participation on committees (like environmental scorecard) where having a statewide impact is powerful for members.

Due to conflicting feelings among the group about the meaning and purpose of committees clarifying the value of committees and regional working groups warranted a deeper conversation. Focus group members were asked: Should the committees come back? Participants responses summarized that the current system of standing committees and ad hoc committees is working well but that there needs to be a clear goal for each committee and that if there isn’t a clear goal then a committee shouldn’t be formed. When asked about the meaning and purpose of regional working groups there was a general ethos of befuddlement over regional working groups that there was “no clear goal” for the groups with one participant commenting that “I didn’t know what the point was when I was there”.

Prepared by Cultivation Center March 2018
CAEE Challenges

Questions four and five were designed to draw out constructive feedback on CAEE’s member services and programs. Themes from this conversation were centered on geographical challenges— that CAEE “services the front range and everyone else gets left out”, on funding constraints leading to “program priority and business planning challenges”, and focus— whether on delineating member benefits, long-term member engagement as well as diversity and inclusiveness issues.

Supporting insights include:

- CAEE provides services whether you’re a membership or not - maybe there needs to be specific member services?
- CAEE needs to find ways to keep long-term members engaged;
- Redefine the focus of the annual conference- the shift to formal education lowers the value for outdoor/informal educators;
- Speak to the diversity in the EE field in the images and ethos of the website and other communications materials;
- Can bigger, well funded EE organizations be tasked with “pulling up” the smaller organizations?

Conference specific comments:

- Can the conference offer committee time or affinity groups for longer-term members to participate in? How to get people to go to these sessions?
- The conference used to better instill a sense of community among CAEE members, but for new people it could feel like a clique;
- “Now at the conference I don’t recognize 75% of people that are there - which is great because there’s more new blood”;
- Value of having a booth at the conference- biggest new audience capture for the year (75 new names);

Advocacy specific comments:

- Members still want statewide EE standards and believe CAEE can and should play a key role in moving that forward;
- Can CAEE develop an EE toolkit that member organizations can share with their city council and local government?
- Can CAEE compile case studies of EE impact to support advocacy efforts?
- Awards help. When legislator sees the EE program in your district get an award;
Better train board members to be EE advocates starts with board development and board recognition.

Sustainability specific comments:
- Participants are concerned about CAEE’s sustainability, if the operating the organization is costing more than overall “revenue” what can we do?
- Asked about creative ways to get capacity building support, specifically strategic planning;
- Asked is there a sustainability related “tension” between meeting the needs of veteran and new members;
- Look at research that can indicate what the next generation of EE looks like. CAEE needs to step outside of what it is doing “right now”;
- What is the relationship between CAEE and NAAEE like? How can that be leveraged?
- Develop a leadership track the meets 4x per year live or by webinar, at the conference— an example was given from the National Association for Interpretation.

When asked the question, If you were recruiting someone to join CAEE, describe the next version of CAEE. What’s the value?, participants shared comments that are summarized as being a CAEE member would mean becoming part of the big picture of EE while also tapping into a network of support. As one participant said, “By joining, you’re part of a bigger EE regional and national scene. It’s evolving with the needs of the membership. You’re part of something that’s changing or growing and a part of something that’s bigger than any single one of us”. And another who commented, “It’s your one stop shop to start your trajectory in your EE career. You will learn and have a pathway and backbone of support”. Yet another participant listed the three key member benefits as:
  1) Networking
  2) Professional Development
  3) Advocacy

At the close of the focus group, participants were asked if there was anything important that they wanted to add to the conversation. A key insight was that there was group consensus that some member organizations could pay significantly more for membership dues than they are currently paying. The group agreed that dues could be scaled based on organization size (number of employees) or operating budget. Participants speculated that an organization’s scaled investment in membership dues could result in correlative engagement in CAEE activities. They made specific requests for:
- A discounted membership to NAE as a member benefit but also to formalize CAEE’s relationship with NAE;
Create a donation stream for scholarship memberships.

Additionally, participants stressed the importance of communicating membership benefits— that they should be shared with the community via multiple channels and strategically positioned on the website. They suggested that member benefits could be effectively communicated with a visual infographic rather than a chart. Participants agreed that CAEE’s brand and style matters and should be modernized.

Finally participants commented on fundraising activities associated with annual events and board development. The event focus was on the fundraising breakfast noting that while the location of the breakfast is “beautiful” the event has lost its lustre and might “need a little break”. A reinvented fundraiser would benefit from having alcohol available and would need to attract a different type of donor that is ready to give. One participant commented that she went to the ELK fundraiser which seemed highly successful. Related to fundraising participants commented on the importance of developing CAEE’s into a “fundraising board” that is populated, in part, by members who represent sectors “outside of the EE world” and who can connect CAEE to significant funding streams including individual donors.

SURVEY RESULTS:

In January 2018 a semi-structured survey was deployed to all current CAEE members. A total of 90 respondents participated in the survey. Among those respondents, 40 identified as individual members, 44 identified as organizational members and 6 were unsure about their membership status. The majority of respondents (87%) were from the Northeast region of Colorado with an average of 6.5% of respondents from each of three other regions including Northwest, Southeast and Southwest. At the beginning of the survey anonymity was ensured for survey respondents. Additionally, a closing question gauged respondents interest in generating solutions to help develop the CAEE membership program. Nearly half (46%) of respondents indicated that they were interested to very interested in this opportunity. Questions included in the survey measured how respondents:

1) Access CAEE benefits
2) Value CAEE benefits
3) Access CAEE programming
4) Value CAEE programming
5) Access CAEE services
6) Value CAEE services
7) Perceive membership pricing
8) Desire for new programming
9) Gathered qualitative comments on CAEE member benefits, programs and services

Detailed results can be viewed in the completed survey stored in CAEE’s Survey Monkey account.

Comments:

When asked for open-ended comments about CAEE’s member benefits, programs, and services a range of comments were contributed by respondents who self-identified as “new members” and from respondents who appeared to be long term champions of the organization. Also, several respondents made insightful comments specifically about member fees. The overall tone of this section was one of positivity toward and gratitude for CAEE peppered with constructive criticism.

Some highlight comments are:

*I think it would be great to charge more to larger members based on operating budget or similar scale. I love what I use and have found it most beneficial for newer folks (either to the state or to EE).*

I love CAEE and want to see this organization not just sustainable, but thriving! I think there needs to be more work on how to keep veteran members engaged, and don't forget your non-formal educators who have always been the backbone of this organization. Many feel the direction in the last few years has been focused on formal ed./teachers, so non-formal folks feel less connected to CAEE. Look at what other/similar organizations are charging for membership...think a lot of your numbers are too low.

*I think Leadership Programming and Evaluation programming would be hugely beneficial.*
I was member, board member, affiliate years ago. CAEE is remarkable and has stood the test of time. Environmental Education, and all facets associated with it, are dynamic. An important task for CAEE is to lead through engagement, a tough role statewide as well as region. CAEE is rather remarkable, but not without challenges.

*Having worked with several state/provincial-level EE organizations, I KNOW that Colorado has one of the top 3 in North America. Katie and crew deserve our appreciation and continued support.*

I could pay a little more for the organization membership, but not much more.

*As far as membership dues... It is hard to say how much to pay as most people in the profession often work seasonally or part time so dues are at an appropriate level. Is there a way CAEE can encourage those in full time salaried positions to be more involved with either time or money?*

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

In light of insights gathered during CAEE’s member listening tour Cultivation Center makes the following recommendations for the organization’s membership services moving forward.

*Create a Coordinated Vision:*

Assess the relevance of current CAEE member committees. Scale back committees with “no purpose” and develop a committee focused on developing a coordinated vision for CAEE serving members with a unified focus that may impact programming, evaluation, funding, messaging and advocacy.

*Modernize Communication:*

Secure resources to sufficiently overhaul the CAEE brand, website and online resources. Ensure that new design and offerings are deeply informed by CAEE members by using a “design with” approach to the updated brand new online presence.

*Leverage Professional Development & Networking Opportunities:*
Build capacity to provide more professional development opportunities via webinar and/or combined in-person and online opportunities to increase learners’ commitment to professional development programming. Incrementally increase networking events across regions while developing local resources to help sustain ongoing events.

*Gather Deeper Insights About Scaling Organizational Membership Fees:*

Reach back out to member organizations to learn more about their affinity for scaling organizational membership fees based on organization (staff) size and/or operating budget. Inquiry should seek to understand program and service improvements required to increase fees and accessible breadth of scale.