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Evaluation Report

NASCC Urban and Community Forestry Train-the-Trainer Sessions for Youth Corps Staff

Funded by National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With support from the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council's 1998 Challenge Cost-Share Grant Program and sources of matching funds, NASCC conducted four intensive two-day train-the-trainer workshops for senior staff of youth corps between November 1999 and May 2000 in four regions of the United States: Midwest, Northeast, Southwest and Northwest. These Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) sessions were a component of NASCC's CorpsRestore Initiative, which seeks to strengthen ecological restoration skills of youth corps staff nationwide.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impacts of NASCC's Regional Urban and Community Forestry Train-the-Trainer Sessions on participants and their programs.

Based upon evaluation and focus group responses, we can draw anecdotal conclusions about training impacts at corps sites nationwide:

Outcomes and Findings

- 1) NASCC UCF Train-the-Trainers Sessions drew strong participation by corps program senior staff and their partner agencies nationwide, and built informal regional networks of corps staff working in the UCF field.
- 1) Training evaluations indicate a high level of satisfaction with *NASCC Regional UCF Training* amongst session participants.
- 2) *NASCC's UCF Sessions* spawned significant numbers of follow-up trainings at corps sites nationwide, and additional corpmember interest in the field. According to respondents, corpmembers pursued additional UCF training as a result of sessions conducted at their corps site. Some members have secured internships and employment.
- 3) As a result of the training, respondents reported that participating corps are laying the groundwork for greater expansion into urban and community forestry projects, are building technical and community relations skills, and are improving the working relationships between corps and forestry groups.

Observations and Recommendations

- 1) Greatest roadblock respondents report facing is lack of time to pursue UCF projects. Some respondents requested that NASCC help them locate appropriate UCF partners and funders in their communities.
- 1) Participants requested additional training — from more advanced UCF workshops to integrating environmental education into UCF efforts.
- 3) Provide training agenda and logistical information about the training well in advance, and direct correspondence about trainings to actual participants rather than to corps leadership..

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Overview

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impacts of NASCC's Regional Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) Train-the-Trainer Sessions on participants and their programs.

Funded by the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council's 1998 Challenge Cost-Share Grant Program and sources of matching funds, NASCC organized and conducted four regional UCF trainings designed to strengthen the environmental restoration skills of youth corps staff as part of its CorpsRestore Initiative. Seventy senior corps staff and members of partner agencies participated in regional trainings in the Midwest (Milwaukee), Southwest (Los Angeles), Northeast (New York) and Northwest (Seattle). A total of twenty-one guest trainers shared expertise and exchanged ideas during these intensive two-day training sessions. Sessions included a mix of hands-on, how-to training along with information sharing and networking opportunities.

Evaluation Criteria

To assess the project's impact, this study uses evaluation criteria outlined in NASCC's Challenge Cost-Share Grant proposal to the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council. Criteria set forth in the proposal are:

- 1) full participation by 80 senior youth corps staff;
- 2) high satisfaction ratings;
- 3) significant numbers of follow-up trainings;
- 4) additional corps carrying out urban forestry projects; and
- 5) establishment of new and improved working relationships between corps and forestry groups.

Methodology

Evaluators used three methods for obtaining feedback about the project:

- 1) participant surveys completed and collected at the close of four regional training sessions. Fifty participants returned exit surveys, for a 71% response rate.

- 2) teleconference focus groups comprised of Midwest and Northeast regional training participants, held six months after training sessions. A small percentage of participants joined the focus group (3 out of 32); and
- 3) questionnaires sent to Midwest and Northeast session participants 180 - days after the training event. One-third of these participants returned follow-up surveys.

Surveys and focus group questions are attached. Focus group questions are listed in Appendix A, UCF Training Exit Survey is Appendix B, and UCF Training Follow-Up Survey is Appendix C.

This study does not use random sampling, so findings reported here cannot be generalized to all training participants. However, the study reports impacts of NASCC's UCF training project on respondent programs, from which we can draw anecdotal conclusions about the training's effectiveness.

Outcomes and Findings

1) NASCC UCF Train-the-Trainers Sessions drew strong participation by corps program senior staff and their partner agencies nationwide, and built informal regional networks of corps staff working in the UCF field.

Seventy (70) senior staff representing 36 corps programs and their partner agencies participated in four regional trainings. A total of 21 trainers from diverse organizations working in urban and community forestry shared their expertise and exchanged ideas with session participants at each of the four regional trainings.

Evidenced by respondent's written comments on training evaluations, participants not only became more aware of corps in their region, but benefited from opportunities to share ideas and network with corps staff working in UCF throughout their region. A focus group participant noted that "it's very helpful to know I can make a call to Massachusetts and ask, 'what are you doing to keep your red oaks alive?' It's helpful to know there are other places doing the same things you are. "

2) Training evaluations indicate a high level of satisfaction with NASCC UCF Training amongst session participants.

Training evaluations were distributed at the close of each of the four regional sessions to gather information about participant satisfaction. Fifty participants returned these surveys, a 71% response rate. Of participants who completed exit surveys:

- Eighty-eight percent (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that the training session was useful; none disagreed - the remaining 12% were "neutral".
- Eighty-five percent (85%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were given adequate resources and information to train corps members on urban and community forestry principles and practices.
- Ninety-three percent (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions were well-organized, and that NASCC staff and guest speakers were well prepared and responsive.

Hands-on training and networking opportunities were aspects of the training that participants found most useful across the board, according to written comments on exit surveys. Comments also indicated that respondents from all four regional trainings found the training manual to be an excellent resource, and NASCC staff Tina Yin to be an efficient and responsive facilitator.

On balance, comments indicated that sessions were geared toward the appropriate skill and knowledge level, and with diverse communities in mind. The majority of participants who commented on the training's usefulness reported learning new and valuable information. Only one respondent stated that while he enjoyed the session, he did not gain new knowledge.

In terms of addressing concerns of diverse communities, four respondents commented that they felt small communities and rural areas did not receive as much attention as did large urban centers. However, the majority of written comments indicated that information presented was relevant and easily transferable.

3) NASCC's UCF Sessions spawned significant numbers of follow-up trainings at corps sites nationwide. According to respondents, corpsmembers expressed interest in and pursued additional UCF training. Some secured internships and employment.

Seven (7) of 11 follow-up survey respondents reported conducting 11 sessions - training 115 corpsmembers and 11 corps staff - using information and resources provided at UCF regional sessions in the Midwest and Northeast.

Seven (7) of eleven respondents stated that a total of 14 corpsmembers expressed interest in receiving further training in UCF skills and/or certifications since they conducted follow-up trainings at their sites.

Two (2) respondents reported that corpsmembers they trained using UCF resources from the NASCC sessions went on to receive more in-depth training. At one site, 10 corpsmembers participated in an expanded arborculture session.

Following training they received at their sites, two corpsmembers found employment as arborists with a private firm and one secured an internship, according to two respondents. Participating staff from two other sites reported that three additional corpsmembers expressed interest in employment or internships in the field.

According to a focus group respondent, one staff person who attended the Midwest session has become a leader in the Minnesota UCF movement. She has been heavily recruited for employment by public and private organizations due to her expertise and leadership in the field.

A focus group participant noted that he is working on developing a "definite job link" that would give corpsmembers two solid years of training in forestry practices at his site, followed by placements in reforestation companies.

4) As a result of the training, participating corps are laying the groundwork for greater expansion into urban and community forestry projects, are building technical and community relations skills, and are improving the working relationships between corps and forestry groups.

Eight (8) of 11 respondents to the follow-up questionnaire reported that they had approached potential UCF partners or had plans to do so within the next 2 to 12 months. Four respondents have been in touch with a total of 5 organizations to date about partnering with them to conduct UCF projects.

Two respondents to the follow-up questionnaire reported obtaining additional funds for UCF projects. A respondent from the Los Angeles Conservation Corps stated that her corps received a \$200,000 grant from Urban Resource Partners as a result of the training; Minnesota Conservation Corps staff noted receiving additional funds but could not attribute a specific amount to the training. A focus group participant also attributed part of an increase in funding to information he received at the training.

Comments by focus group participants also added a qualitative dimension to improvements in relationships between corps and forestry groups. One participant from Ohio stated that his UCF project sponsors are more confident that corpsmembers will complete projects properly now that members have received training. In Minnesota, participating staff noticed that corps members are more actively engaged in conversations with nursery personnel about UCF practices thanks to training they received.

In terms of skill building, focus group participants noted that their UCF techniques have improved as a result of the training, both due to new knowledge gained and through reinforcement of techniques they already knew. At one site, corpsmembers went from planting 100 trees per day to 600 per day during the spring planting season.

Beyond technical aspects, participants reported that the training expanded their view regarding appropriate roles for the corps and for corpsmembers. They cited a need for building linkages with community groups and citizens in order to make UCF projects successful. "Training helped me better see [everything] that needs to go on behind the scenes — do we need to bring volunteers on board, for example?", said one focus group participant. To prevent vandalism to trees, he and his crews plan to coordinate a tree planting with an entire student body of an elementary school — 500 children. Another focus group participant stated that he would like to investigate a broader role for corpsmembers beyond that of "worker bees", providing them with opportunities to build community relations skills. He hopes to thrust the corps more into the forefront of UCF efforts by conducting community meetings and involving corpsmembers as trainers "[That] would be a really valuable experience for corpsmembers."

In summary, respondents reported expanding UCF activities in their communities, building staff and corpsmember capacity, and strengthening relationships with forestry organizations. Below are observations and recommendations from participants on how to improve and expand upon NASCC's UCF activities.

Observations and Recommendations

1) Greatest roadblock respondents report facing is lack of time to pursue UCF projects. Some respondents requested that NASCC help them locate appropriate UCF partners and funders in their communities.

Seven (7) of 11 follow-up survey respondents reported that lack of time was making it difficult for them to pursue UCF projects. Three respondents were also having difficulty finding partners interested in corps labor for UCF, and one with finding funders. One focus group participant noted that most funders of UCF projects will pay for planting but not maintenance. He noted that since trees need continuous watering and as corps programs are able to provide this maintenance (citizen groups are less likely to water large numbers of trees), corps are at a strategic disadvantage when it comes to garnering funds.

2) Participants requested additional training — from more advanced UCF workshops to integrating environmental education into UCF efforts. Given the breadth of the topic, follow-up trainings that expand on UCF themes would provide more in-depth learning. Respondents reported enjoying hands-on,

participatory sessions, and also found networking and action planning sessions useful.

3) Provide training agenda and logistical information about the training well in advance, and direct correspondence about trainings to actual participants rather than to corps leadership. Some participants commented on their evaluations that they did not feel they received information about the training far enough in advance to be able to plan their travels or to feel prepared to attend the session. A number of respondents stated that delivery of materials was delayed within their programs. Directing information about the training to actual participants would address this issue. Training literature recommends that participants receive an agenda and any relevant materials at least one week in advance (Pfeiffer and Jones).

Conclusion

This study is designed to shed light on programmatic impacts resulting from NASCC's Regional UCF Train-the-Trainer Sessions. Although we cannot draw definitive conclusions regarding the project's long term success, evaluation responses suggest that the UCF training expanded the environmental restoration knowledge and skills of corps staff and members nationwide with significant anecdotal effects.

NASCC UCF materials are being used in the field; nationally, conservation and service corps program capacity has been enhanced through participation of 70 staff members in UCF regional trainings, and 115 corpsmembers in UCF follow-up trainings; additional dollars are flowing to corps programs to fund urban and community forestry projects; and corps staff report stronger relationships with forestry organizations, which respondents attribute to NASCC UCF training.