

Pennsylvania Non-Formal Environmental Educator Certification

A report by

The Pennsylvania Association of Environmental Educators

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The Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education



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Executive Summary

As national awareness of environmental education (EE) has grown over the past decade, efforts to raise the quantity and quality of EE programming have taken root across the country. Recent reports by the National Environmental Education Advisory Council and the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) have focused these efforts on improving educator preparation as the most effective means of raising quality and expanding access to EE programming. At the national level, EETAP and the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) have begun developing the processes and guidelines to raise standards within the non-formal EE community. These efforts have led to national accreditation standards to guide the development of educator certification programs at the state and local level.

Though environmental education has been increasingly integrated into the formal K-12 education system in many states including Pennsylvania, non-formal educators who teach in settings outside the classroom have not had access to formalized professional credentialing programs until very recently. Due to Pennsylvania's present EE certification program for formal educators and the recent decision of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to include EE as an option for pre-service educator programs, the Pennsylvania EE community is now concentrating on what it perceives to be a gap in the certification process—certification of non-formal educators.

Target Audience and Definitions

One of the primary reasons for the following study was to determine how much consensus there was among various Pennsylvania stakeholder groups regarding certification as a way of standardizing and professionalizing the non-formal EE field. The Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education (PCEE) and the Pennsylvania Association of Environmental Educators (PAEE), with support from the AmeriCorps VISTA program, undertook a feasibility study to measure support for non-formal EE certification among the following three stakeholder groups in Pennsylvania:

- Practicing non-formal environmental educators,
- Supervisors and employers of non-formal environmental educators, and
- University or college educators who are involved in the development and training of pre-service environmental educators.

For the purposes of this study, *non-formal environmental educators* were defined as qualified educators who are not credentialed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and who primarily teach “noncaptive” audiences in nature centers and other non-formal settings.

Survey Design and Analysis

An online survey tool was developed to question each of the three targeted stakeholder groups. The online survey was emailed to approximately 10,000 individuals from pre-developed email distribution lists composed of organizations and professional networks across the state.

- The study incorporated responses from nearly 800 individuals across Pennsylvania.
- Of those, over 470 members of the Pennsylvania non-formal EE community participated in the survey, representing a significant cross-section of the field.

Results from the 45-question survey were analyzed quantitatively to calculate rating averages, response counts, and percentages. Open-ended questions and narrative comments were analyzed qualitatively by categorizing responses based on content and then recording category frequencies. Both types of results are depicted graphically and narratively in the Results Summary found in this report.

Conclusions

Responses to the survey were generally quite supportive of non-formal EE certification among all three stakeholder groups in Pennsylvania, matching or exceeding levels of support from the larger EE community as measured by EETAP in their national study of non-formal EE certification. The following conclusions were gathered from a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the PCEE/PAEE survey results:

- **The Pennsylvania EE community is interested and engaged in the idea of certification.**
- **Non-formal EE practitioners see certification as important to their individual careers, but view it as even more important to the field as a whole.**
- **Employers and supervisors of non-formal EE practitioners support certification for current employees, but a program must be rigorous, compatible with current hiring practices, and offer professional development opportunities for less experienced practitioners to be broadly relevant and valuable.**
- **College and university faculty and staff generally recognize the need for professional certification and a significant number have indicated interest in being involved in the planning, design and implementation of a certification program. They also cite significant institutional and financial barriers to their involvement.**

Next Steps

Based on the above conclusions and confidence that results from the survey are representative of Pennsylvania's non-formal EE community, PCEE and PAEE plan to continue the development process with a series of follow-up discussion groups. These regional focus groups will invite all members of the non-formal EE community to contribute further input into the design of a certification program and will begin to focus discussion on topics that arose from the survey study. The small group discussion format is an opportunity to further publicize results of this study and to record comments and ideas from the community on more substantive aspects of a certification program.

While results from this study will serve as a solid foundation for incorporating the input of the Pennsylvania EE community, many issues still warrant further investigation. Several important questions pertaining to the development and administration of a non-formal EE certification program have emerged from this study as well as prior research. For the development process to remain as inclusive and collaborative as possible, the following questions will be posed to the non-formal EE community for further input and to guide future decision-making on the content, design and implementation of a certification program:

- What organizations, partnerships and resources (including colleges and universities, environmental non-profits, state agencies and commissions, and other groups offering certifications) need to be developed to make non-formal EE certification sustainable, relevant and valuable?
- What does a certification program specifically need to ensure it is rigorous and valuable enough to gain the support of employers and potential applicants?
- How can a certification program achieve a critical mass of applicants to make the program viable and self-sustaining?
- How can a certification program be compatible with current hiring practices and employer needs?
- What proportion of a certification program should be professional development and on-the-job training (potentially more costly)? What proportion should be assessment of candidates' competency through tests and other assessments (potentially less costly)?
- What is the most effective and viable method of assessing candidates for certification?
- What minimum prerequisites should be necessary for admission into a non-formal certification program (education, experience, etc)? How should this be balanced to maintain rigor while still remaining relevant and accessible to new practitioners?