

Key 2008 Projects of the Alberta Council for Environmental Education: An External Evaluation

Submitted by

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ACEE Alberta Council for
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ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ALBERTA



Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE)

Evaluation 2008: Final Report

Executive Summary

Background

In 2007, an evaluation consultant was hired by ACEE as part of the organization's Logic Model for Strategic Initiatives, to collaboratively develop a developmental evaluation framework to define and document key events and useful indicators of progress with regards to ACEE's evolution and achievements, and to test key elements of the annual Program Plans for degrees of success. During 2007 - 2008, ACEE hosted a major conference, several professional development workshops, and spear-headed several initiatives, including convening committees to develop a provincial public poll on environmental education (EE) and to investigate educational policy alternatives. ACEE also hosted a successful EE Leadership Clinic in November, 2008, produced and distributed a regular newsletter, and updated their website and EE Resource Centre.

Consultant Activities

As part of her activities, the evaluator collaboratively developed an ACEE Board Survey, conducted in early May of 2008, and an on-line Needs Assessment Survey to reach a range of stakeholders across Alberta. The main evaluation methodology was a series of evaluative interviews held with a cross section of ACEE stakeholders in late 2008, to solicit and compile their opinions and experiences. The purpose of the interviews was to "take the pulse" of ACEE at this stage of its development, provide a window into its evolution and impact, provide some baseline data, and document successes, challenges and events over this past year. Since ACEE is still a young organization, the consultant felt that conducting general evaluation interviews and surveys of province-wide stakeholders with regards to their perspectives and needs around ACEE would be premature. It is recommended that a more general province-wide survey be conducted in 12 – 18 months time.

Target Groups and Interview Themes

With input from ACEE staff, six target groups were selected to draw interview candidates from, including Board members groups who have made commitments to deliver on the *ACEE Framework to Advance EE in Alberta* document, stakeholders who sit on various ACEE working committees, as well as some "dissenting voices": stakeholders who have been critical of ACEE and its mandate. Thirteen interviews were completed, and selection was done using purposeful and random sampling strategies from a total population of ninety-two stakeholders.

Interview question themes were drawn from the ACEE member needs assessment survey (April 2008), the May 2008 Board survey and the ACEE Work Plan for 2008 – 2010. Data has been compiled under the main research themes, and salient quotes are included to better illustrate findings in participants' own words.

Interview Findings: Summary and Conclusions

Overall the interviews and stakeholder surveys paint a positive and optimistic picture of ACEE. Its mission and goals are clear to most stakeholders, and there is broad support and a clear rationale for its collaborative and networking roles. The professional development opportunities ACEE has provided, notably the recent Leadership Clinic and the 2007 Trails to Sustainability conference are ranked very highly by participants and seen as of high value to their organizations. The ability of ACEE to convene multi-stakeholder groups in order to encourage networking, communication and partnerships and advance EE province-wide is a highly supported role.

The Executive Director is perceived as committed and energetic, and brings strong leadership skills and detailed organizational and administrative structure to the organization. The Education Coordinator, while new to her position, is recognized very favourably by the EE community who have worked with her, and has brought good organizational and interpersonal skills to ACEE.

Some areas that require further work include the development and profiling of concrete projects and “products” in order to build credibility and profile across the province. The Board survey results also spoke to the importance of getting project work done “on the ground”, and communicating activities and results out to others in the province – part of a stronger action and outreach initiative that ACEE should consider in the coming months. Other areas where more work is needed are clarifying and profiling ACEE’s target audiences, providing further outreach and promotion to teachers and other formal education stakeholders, and more inclusion of non-formal and informal educators throughout ACEE’s activities and administrative structure.

ACEE is a young organization with a very large mandate, and its collaborative leadership, committed Board and current polling and policy initiatives are seen as important underpinnings of its positive evolution.

ACEE Profile and Promotion

Interviewees heard about ACEE primarily through the ED as well as other colleagues, this personal contact being a preferred method of communications. This desire for “warm body” communication was also supported by respondents to the May 2008 Needs Assessment survey. The favoured response of what the best way to hear about ACEE would be was through word of mouth, due to the added credibility this method provides. However, several members of the formal education community felt that ACEE had not reached their constituents – an audience that requires more promotional effort.



Board and Committee Contributions

Board members responded that role clarity was improving with time, and were generally pleased with the level of communication and direction from the ED. The participants in the polling and policy initiatives and the framework delivery initiative were also supportive of the process, the communication and the level of leadership provided. Clarity of purpose and participation in any committee is a key element of both maximizing and sustaining participation, and in developing ownership to an organization and/or an initiative (Justice, 2006).

Optimizing Board and Committee Member Skills

Most Board and committee members felt they had been adequately engaged in committee processes, and stated that the ED was an organized and skilled facilitator. Two Board members felt that their skills had not been adequately tapped, one requested more transparency in how members are selected for specific tasks, and another asked for a varied process in how members could contribute to Board discussions, to ensure full participation in Board discussions. Participants who feel engaged and able to authentically contribute to a meeting or initiative are key to its overall success. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A review of the written Board skills inventory survey is recommended, as well as the development of a clear process for tasking out Board duties. Instituting a variety of Board contribution methods (e.g. written commentary during a meeting, round table check-ins) may help meet some specified needs.

Opportunities for Participation in ACEE Adequate

Interviewees that were not on the ACEE Board or part of any working committees felt that there were openings for their participation if they wanted to or had time to contribute further to the organization. There seems to be a sense of openness and accessibility in ACEE, and a willingness to include all interested participants.

Board Recommendations: A Broader, More Reflective Perspective

Several Board members recommended specific ways in which they felt the Board's work and processes could be improved. Main points are summarized as follows:

- broader membership involvement and engagement in carrying out ACEE objectives;
- Broadening the stakeholder members to encompass more community groups and non-formal educators, as well as a range of media stakeholders;
- celebrating the successes of member groups;
- broadening the Board membership to both include both a range of formal and non-formal educators, and broader geographical representation.

Overall Clarity of ACEE Goals and Purpose



Interviewees were consistent in their understanding of ACEE's overall mission and purpose. Well articulated goals and clear communication around purpose is an important success factor when developing, launching and running any program or organization. Clarity of goals is also important in effective evaluation – the goals must be measurable and attainable (Weiss, 1998).

The main two roles seen as important for ACEE to fulfil are to champion environmental education and build networks that facilitate the exchange of information and provide opportunities for collaboration within the Albertan EE community. ACEE seems to be on the right track with its general messaging. This gives ACEE some clear direction as well: as an advocate for EE and as a key supporting structure: building the network, encouraging collaboration and building capacity.

ACEE Rationale

Most participants cited the need for ACEE to serve as an umbrella group who could network and coordinate the many stakeholders involved in EE. This also supports the needs assessment data, which spoke to a key networking and collaborative role for ACEE. Several interviewees expressed a lack of clarity around ACEE's audience, both in discussions around ACEE's goals as well as the organizations' successes and areas for further work. This is an important area for the ACEE Board and staff to clarify and state succinctly. Knowing your audience and speaking directly and clearly to them is an important element of successful communication. If there is a lack of clarity amongst stakeholders, especially from an organization that is working to network and collaborate with differing groups, it is important to rectify this.

ACEE's Priority Areas of Activity Supported, Networking #1

Once again, the role of ACEE as a networking agency was the most strongly supported by stakeholders (9 of 13 respondents, or 70%). Participants also felt that ACEE had been successful in meeting a need in the EE community by networking a variety of groups and players. The collaborative approach that ACEE has maintained was also supported, even by some of the groups' "nay-sayers". This is interesting information to apply to ACEE's outreach models, as their networking and collaborative approach are highly valued, and therefore should be profiled and celebrated. This gives ACEE some clear direction as an advocate for EE and, as part of this support, building the network and continuing their collaborative approach. There was also good support expressed for the research activities of polling and policy analysis as a good role for ACEE to take on.

Stakeholder Communications

Respondents were generally satisfied with the amount and type of general communications they receive from ACEE. Communications and promotion are key elements that can spell success or failure for any program, specifically the internal and external communication processes that both steer and promote the program.



Responses to the ACEE e-newsletter (“EE in Alberta”) were mixed – eight of the 13 respondents receive the newsletter but read it sparingly. The ACEE on-line Resource Centre was not a well-used site by the interviewees; the suggestions of profiling success stories, case studies and exemplary programs might change this.

Capacity Building and PD For Individuals, Too Early for Organizations

Almost all respondents felt that they had benefited personally through participation on the Board, on various committees, and through ACEE’s conferences and professional development offerings, but that it was too early to tell if their organizations had benefited from associations with ACEE. They mentioned conferences, workshops and presentations ACEE has hosted over the past two years, and highlighted the quality of the sessions they attended and the networking and peer learning opportunities. ACEE was seen to be in a good position to convene conferences and workshops with partners, thereby creating a synergy and ability to produce events that were larger and of better quality than any of them could have done on their own. ACEE can add much value to the EE sector by playing a convening role and enabling multiple groups to benefit from events.

The four participants in the recent Leadership Clinic were very positive about the experience, and all felt their organizations had gained greatly from the clinic.

More Connections to Stewardship Groups

An important theme in the May 2008 needs assessment survey was the inclusion of non-formal audiences in EE organizational programs (such as conferences) and further integration of non-formal and informal EE groups within ACEE. This corresponds to the responses of several interviewees who strongly suggested more contact and support for the stewardship sector, including community, youth and other volunteer groups. This audience is an important one with respect to on-the-ground action projects, and ACEE should explore how to accommodate them more fully.

Valuing Networks

Stakeholders stated that good networks provide recommended resources, current innovations, profiles of best practices and upcoming events that help build capacity and connect organizations. Some specific requests were made for case studies of different groups and audiences, best practices, success stories, early adopters, exemplary programs that were open to stakeholder visits, and group profiles on the web site. This feedback can help ACEE tailor their network to better meet the needs of their members.

Concerns With ACEE

Interviewees were asked to cite any concerns or aspects they would like to change about ACEE and what it does. Several respondents reflected comments from the May 2008 Board survey and stressed the need for ACEE to accomplish some concrete projects, in order to develop more of a track record “on the ground”. The request for more “action”



and concrete products from ACEE is an important one for the staff to consider, as ACEE moves from being a fledgling organization into its third year of operation. Given the upcoming public poll, the recent Leadership Clinic, and the policy work that ACEE has embarked on, they seem well on their way to producing some of the on-the-ground “products” that respondents are looking for.

Some Language Needs a Second Look

Concerns noted by some interviewees in the mission, vision and mandate documents of ACEE included a sense of “lobbying” and aggressiveness in some of the wording used in the impact statements, and concern around specific language that seemed “self-serving”. Specific wording suggestions were provided around the use of “supporting and sharing” instead of “advancing”, and “learning” versus “training, in order to better reflect ACEE audience cultures.

Priorities For ACEE: Stay the Networking Course

Interviewees were asked what they thought ACEE priorities should be if they could focus on only one or two areas. Maintaining, strengthening and broadening the networking role across sectors was a common theme, echoing the areas where respondents felt that ACEE had the greatest success, as well as the findings from the 2008 needs assessment survey.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Background.....	10
Evaluation Framework and Objectives	11
Evaluation Objectives.....	11
ACEE Activities.....	11
Evaluation Process: Consultant Activities.....	12
Rationale: Why a Participatory Qualitative Evaluation Model?.....	12
Evaluation Methodology: Stakeholder Interviews.....	13
Why Targeted Evaluation Interviews?	13
Target Groups to Interview	14
Sampling Strategies: Who to Select and How?.....	14
Interview Question Themes.....	15
Interview Participants: Numerical Identification and Target Group.....	16
Evaluation Interview Data: Compilation and Summary	16
Theme 1: ACEE Profile.....	17
Promotion of ACEE.....	17
Best Way? Through Colleagues	18
Theme 2: Stakeholder Contributions / Efficacy.....	19
Optimizing Committee and Board Member Skills.....	20
Workload Appropriate	21
Good Leadership an Important Factor	21
Opportunities for Participation in ACEE Adequate	22
Board Recommendations: A Broader, More Reflective Perspective	23
Theme 3: ACEE Goals / Purpose.....	24
ACEE Rationale	25
Broad Support for ACEE’s Collaborative Mission.....	26
Some Concerns Around ACEE’s Audience.....	27
Endorsing ACEE’s Main Areas of Activity.....	28
Theme 4: Stakeholder Communications	30
Theme 5: Capacity Building of Organizations	31
The Value of Networks.....	32
Theme 6: Assessment of ACEE Professional Development.....	34
Theme 7: Past Successes and Future Directions.....	35
Concerns With ACEE.....	35
Should ACEE be a Membership Organization?.....	37
Priorities For ACEE.....	38
Some Final Words.....	40
Summary and Conclusions	41
ACEE Profile and Promotion.....	41
Board and Committee Contributions.....	41
Optimizing Board and Committee Member Skills.....	41
Opportunities for Participation in ACEE Adequate	42
Board Recommendations: A Broader, More Reflective Perspective	42



Overall Clarity of ACEE Goals and Purpose.....	42
ACEE Rationale	43
Audience Clarification Needed	44
ACEE’s Priority Areas of Activity Supported, Networking #1	44
Stakeholder Communications	44
Capacity Building of Individuals, Too Early for Organizations	45
More Connections to Stewardship Groups	45
Valuing Networks.....	45
ACEE Professional Development Events Rated Positively.....	45
Networking a Success.....	46
Concerns With ACEE.....	46
Some Language Needs a Second Look.....	46
Should ACEE be a Membership Organization?.....	47
Priorities For ACEE: Stay the Networking Course.....	47
Summary.....	47
References	48



Background

The Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) was formally created in 2006, as an umbrella initiative to collaboratively advance environmental education in Alberta. Stakeholders developed a draft Logic Model for Strategic Initiatives that was ratified in September 2007. An external evaluation is part of this work plan, as follows:

Objective 4-1: Evaluate the success of ACEE's activities and document how the results are "plowed back". An evaluation consultant was contracted to carry out a developmental, process-oriented evaluation, in order to be flexible and responsive to the evolution of ACEE activities and outputs. This report documents the work to date in year one of the three-year strategic planning cycle (2008 – 2010). This report provides some background on ACEE and its activities, details the evaluation framework, and summarizes and assesses several evaluative research treatments, including and a series of stakeholder interviews.

The Structure and Functioning of the Alberta Council for Environmental Education

The structure and logistical functioning of the organization, how it operates and communicates both internally and externally, its various power structures and its level of transparency all factor into the successes and challenges it faces, and therefore are tracked through the developmental evaluation.

Full time staff: Gareth Thomson, Executive Director; Aliza Weller, Program Coordinator. Ad hoc contractors are hired for specific work.

Nine Member ACEE Board: There is a strong and committed nine member Board who has standard governance duties: they are not concerned with the operational details of ACEE. All members have been provided with a Board Operating Manual, which was reviewed by the evaluator.

“Members” or Affiliates of ACEE:

ACEE is not an official membership organization in the sense of collecting fees and maintaining member lists, but strives to profile and support environmental education (EE) groups across Alberta through providing a “hub” or network.

As of December 2008, there are 86 Organizations on the ACEE Resource Centre web site. Over 180 organizations participated in developing the Framework to Advance EE in Alberta. 92 resources are listed on site, as well as current calendar events relevant to members. ACEE has been formed as a participatory organization with many ways for members to get involved, including taking part in needs assessments and provincial surveys, commenting on plans and strategies, attending conferences and meetings, and participating in professional development training.



Evaluation Framework and Objectives

The initial task for the evaluation consultant was to collaboratively develop an evaluation framework to document and track the processes, events and outcomes of ACEE during 2008. It was developed alongside the ACEE Logic Model for Strategic Initiatives, and was meant to be flexible and responsive to the evolving processes and developments of the ACEE activities and outputs. The evaluation framework serves as an outline of the evaluation process and is included in the *Appendices*.

Evaluation Objectives

- Create a developmental evaluation framework to define and document key events and useful indicators of progress with regards to ACEE's evolution and achievements, in order to test key elements of the annual Program Plans for degrees of success.
- Assist in effective implementation of the activities proposed by ACEE through providing regular informal check-ins and input into on-going projects to provide feedback and recommendations for course adjustments if deemed necessary.
- Solicit and compile the opinions and experiences of external stakeholders with ACEE and ACEE programs, as part of the overall evaluation process.
- Act in an external advisory role as a "critical friend" to ACEE.

ACEE Activities

During 2007 - 2008, ACEE hosted a major conference, several professional development workshops, and spear-headed several initiatives, including the convening of a committee to develop a provincial public poll on environmental education (EE) and a committee tasked with investigating educational and environmental policy alternatives. ACEE hosted a successful EE Leadership Clinic in November, 2008, produced and distributed a regular newsletter, and updated their website and EE Resource Centre.

As part of the evaluation process, the evaluator collaboratively developed two electronic surveys to assess Board and stakeholder experiences and needs. The ACEE Board Survey was conducted in early May of 2008, and seven out of nine Board members completed it. ACEE also conducted an on-line Needs Assessment Survey with a broad range of stakeholders across Alberta, in the spring of 2008, to connect with a range of EE professionals and organizations, and create a baseline data set to help ACEE evaluate the success of its capacity-building program. The survey was sent out to 160 individuals, representing 120 groups that offer EE services in Alberta. In addition the survey was open to the public, as a link to the survey was available on the ACEE website (www.abcee.org). There were 71 respondents, representing 56 Alberta EE organizations. A final report was written that profiled the survey's results (ACEE; May 12, 2008). Both



survey findings have been included in the interpretation and assessment of the stakeholder interviews, and in the final conclusions of this report.

Evaluation Process: Consultant Activities

The consultant conducted several activities supporting evaluation including:

- Review of documentation of ACEE beginnings, rationale for its existence, organizational structure, governance model, Board manual. February 2008
- Development of an evaluation framework that parallels ACEE’s strategic plan: Draft circulated to an ad hoc advisory committee for review: March 31, 2008. Final framework completed: April 18, 2008.
- Phone and email support, conference call participation, review of Board meeting agendas and minutes, review and comments on draft proposals, reports and articles: Ongoing
- Stakeholder Needs Assessment Survey: reviewed first draft of needs assessment survey and provided comments; reviewed the compiled and summarized data, advised on conclusions/ actions. May 15, 2008
- ACEE Board Survey instrument: Developed and finalized survey for Board members to assess their experiences, identify areas for improvement: reviewed findings. May 2008
- Reviewed ED Performance Review document May 2008
- Developed draft evaluation forms for ACEE workshops and Leadership Clinic: Fall 2008
- Formative Evaluation Interview Development: Extracted themes for interview questions for developmental evaluation interviews from needs assessment data and ACEE Program Plan and Framework. Developed draft questions, reviewed by ACEE staff and Board members, final interview guide approved. November 2008
- Developmental Evaluation Interviews: Conducted 13 interviews with a broad range of ACEE stakeholders and associates. Final Report: December 2008

Rationale: Why a Participatory Qualitative Evaluation Model?

“A major advantage of the qualitative study of program process is the opportunity to find the unexpected. The evaluator can follow the trail wherever it leads”

(Weiss, 1998, pp. 181).

Participatory evaluation has particular value in an educational setting (Cousins and Earl, 1992) as it is an extension of the stakeholder based model with a focus on enhancing evaluation *use* through primary user’s increased depth and range of participation in the process. Many evaluations undertaken are often not used. The question then becomes how to make evaluations accessible and important to users and responsive to their needs while maintaining sufficient technical quality. The stakeholder-based model was an initial attempt to move in this direction. Stakeholders are involved in evaluation activities such as deciding on the types of questions to ask, and the kinds of data to collect.



This participatory emphasis of the evaluation model was recommended to serve several purposes: By involving primary users - staff of ACEE - in the initial design and implementation of the evaluation, a deeper understanding of the process is enabled, more ownership of the evaluation is encouraged, actual use of the data is greatly improved, and organizational learning is enhanced. Three decades of research has shown us that participatory evaluations increase the utilization of the evaluation results, increases user commitment and advocacy for programs, helps to link the practise-based communities and organizational members and strengthens synergy and collaborative devices, all beneficial and desired outcomes of this study (Huberman, 1990, Cousins and Earl, 1992).

Qualitative evaluation models emphasize understanding, rather than precise measurement of events. Their detailed inquiry methods identify recurrent themes and patterns in the data, allowing the determination of which aspects of a program are salient to staff and to participants, and why. They also enable an exploration of *unintended* processes and consequences: features that are not anticipated during the programs' development or implementation. A flexible evaluation design allows unanticipated features to show up: i.e. the evaluator is not just asking about things that are *supposed* to be there. These unintended features may be good or bad, yet need to be discovered to better understand the overall program (Weiss, 1998). This provides the evaluator with a more holistic picture of the social and political context, the prior history and the nature of the culture within which a program operates.

Evaluation Methodology: Stakeholder Interviews

The main evaluation methodology was a series of evaluative interviews held with a cross section of ACEE stakeholders in late 2008, to solicit and compile their opinions and experiences. The purpose of the interviews was to “take the pulse” of ACEE at this stage of its development, provide a window into its evolution and impact, provide some baseline data, and document successes, challenges and events over this past year. The interviews also provide an opportunity to document some areas for development and re-adjustment, to enable ACEE to better serve its mission and vision.

Why Targeted Evaluation Interviews?

Since ACEE is still a young organization, the consultant felt that conducting general evaluation interviews and surveys of province-wide stakeholders with regards to their perspectives and needs around ACEE would be premature. ACEE does not provide member services like some networks, and there has been no big conferences or workshops in 2008. Current projects such as the public poll, the policy work and the Leadership Clinic will benefit stakeholder groups eventually, but since ACEE is still in a development phase, more time is required for its accomplishments to be seen “on the ground” and be able to be assessed by a broad cross-section of stakeholders. Instead, a more targeted interview process was developed that selectively accessed specific



stakeholder groups. It is recommended that a more general province-wide survey be conducted in 12 – 18 months time.

Interviews were transcribed and all responses kept confidential: no names have been attached to the interview data, to allow the interviewees anonymity around any disclosures and comments. Sue sent out an introductory email to the prospective interviewees to set up a convenient date, explain the evaluation project and enclose the interview questions. The introductory email and the interview guide are included in the Appendices.

Target Groups to Interview

With input from ACEE staff, six target groups were selected to draw interview candidates from. These groups represent stakeholders with a range of different levels of involvement and experience with the organization. It was seen as valuable to solicit feedback from Board members who have been involved with ACEE from the start, groups who have made commitments to deliver on the *ACEE Framework to Advance EE in Alberta* document, stakeholders who sit on various ACEE working committees, as well as some “dissenting voices”: stakeholders who have been critical of ACEE and its mandate. ACEE staff provided Sue with complete lists of all target group members and their contact information for the selection process.

Sampling Strategies: Who to Select and How?

Three main purposeful sampling strategies will be used to select interview participants from the identified stakeholder groups. Purposeful sampling strategies were used in this process, as they lend themselves to small sample sizes, and their focus is to access information-rich cases – an important criteria with a young, evolving organization such as ACEE. Selection is strategic and purposeful, and dependent on criteria that is established to access required information. Three types of sampling strategies were used, as follows:

1. **Criterion-based purposeful random sampling** of specific ACEE stakeholder populations: e.g. just one or two criteria are to be met before a random sample is taken from an identified population; for example, the interviewee needs to be a committee member, so random sampling is done from this defined population.
2. **Criterion Sampling:** Interviewees are selected that satisfy specific criterion. E.g. participants that have had long term experience with an organization, participants that belong to a selected type of organization (youth group, non-profit, government, etc).
3. **Extreme or Outlier sampling:** Samples taken from stakeholders who don't fall into general categories, such as those who have had outstanding successes, those who have chosen not to participate in an organization, or those who have been critical of an organization or initiative. Investigating these unusual manifestations can provide interesting and useful insights into an organizations' perceived profile, and contribute to further inclusiveness.



The thirteen interview participants were chosen with the following sampling strategies:

1) **Polling initiative** committee members: 15 – 20 members [2 interviews](#)

Chosen by Purposeful Random sample: E.g. participant needs to be a committee member

2) **Policy Alternatives** project members: 15 – 20 members [2 interviews](#)

Chosen by Purposeful Random sample: E.g. participant need to be a committee member

3) **EE Leadership Clinic** participants: 30 participants [2 interviews](#)

Selected via **criterion sampling**: Selections were made from the participant list with specific criteria, as follows:

Criteria: Select a range of participants:

- Ensure that the interviewee is a main player in their organization and so able to provide adequate information
- Select at least 1 group with good capacity and 1 group with relatively poor capacity
- Target a range of the types of groups: for example, 1 NGO, 1 govt. group, one liaison group
- Look for a range of longevity with ACEE: i.e. one group that has been involved with ACEE recently, and a group that has participated for a long time with ACEE.

4) **ACEE Board members**: 9 members [3 interviews](#)

Select via criterion sampling:

Criteria:

- Select on the basis of length of involvement with ACEE and its Board (long term)
- Select with respect to Board members' background: hear from a diverse mix of stakeholders – i.e. educators / government employees/ funders
-

5) **Groups committed to delivering on the *Framework to Advance EE in Alberta***:

20 members [2 interviews](#)

One interviewee will be chosen by Purposeful Random sample: E.g. need to be a committee member, and one will be selected by ACEE staff, in order to maximize potential feedback.

6) **Outliers**: One “unengaged” ACEE stakeholder, and a known nay-sayer:

Extreme or deviant case sampling focuses on cases that are unusual or special.

E.g. “unengaged” (someone who hasn’t shown up to ACEE events: a “by-stander” or “nay-sayer”): give some time to a dissenting voice and opinion, and perhaps build some credibility with this group as well. [2 interviews](#)

Interview Question Themes

The themes were drawn from the ACEE member needs assessment survey (April 2008), the May 2008 Board survey and the ACEE Work Plan for 2008 – 2010.

Thirteen interviews were conducted in total, each averaging about 45 minutes in length.

Two interviews were done in person and the rest by phone. Interviews were transcribed



immediately after the interview was completed. Actual questions posed during the interviews are numbered and presented in boxes within each identified theme for easier accessibility. Participant quotes are numbered in accordance with the table below, and included (in blue text) to retain the individuals' own words, add more detail and depth, and allow for further interpretation by staff and partners. In keeping with the agreed upon interview code of conduct, all identification of individuals has been omitted. Interviewees are numbered for clarity, and identified by their target group.

Interview Participants: Numerical Identification and Target Group

Table 1: Interviewee Number and Target Group
1. Outlier
2. Polling Initiative committee member
3. Board member, Framework deliverer
4. Board Member
5. Polling Initiative committee member
6. Outlier
7. Leadership Clinic participant
8. Leadership Clinic participant
9. Leadership Clinic participant
10. Board member, Leadership Clinic participant
11. Board member, Leadership Clinic participant
12. Policy Alternative committee member
13. Framework deliverer

Participant Categories and Number of Interviews:

Outliers – 2

Board members – 4

Polling initiative – 2

Policy Alternatives – 1

Leadership Clinic - 5

Framework delivery - 2

Note – several interviewees were part of more than one target group; i.e. Board members who also attended the Leadership Clinic.

Evaluation Interview Data: Compilation and Summary



Theme 1: ACEE Profile

Promotion of ACEE

Questions under the first theme revolved around how interviewees heard about ACEE, and their length of association with the organization. The evaluator attempted to interview people who had been involved with ACEE over a longer time period, in order to benefit from their experience with such a young organization.

The Executive Director was a main conduit – five of the 13 participants heard about ACEE directly through Gareth. Word of mouth through other work colleagues was another avenue for four participants, three heard about ACEE through its workshops and conference offerings, and several interviewees were involved with ACEE from its inception. Program participants were also asked about promotion and communications, specifically around issues of publicity and preferred methods of communication.

1. How did you first hear about ACEE?

Probe: was there a person or event ?

Posters? Word of Mouth?

5. I heard about it first through my job – our Executive Director had participated in earlier meetings towards developing the ACEE Framework, and gave this opportunity to me to participate in a then-upcoming workshop in Edmonton to develop the framework to advance EE.

7. I first heard about ACEE a few years ago, by word of mouth, I had heard about it a few times before but never checked it out, as it didn't seem applicable to what I do.

8. First time was when they held sustainability workshops around EE in Alberta 2 or 3 years ago – I was involved in some of those meetings around where could we go in Alberta with EE.

The responses reflect a fairly good range of promotional “vehicles” for a new organization. There was some discussion with several participants about the use of electronic communications – its limits and benefits, and some suggestions for more personal contact.

1. ACEE has a lot of documentation, and sends them out electronically but that's not always the best way to get people to understand. Working in an e-world – a lot of these things can be ignored. It is not a high priority for me to read the documentation on email.

3. The best type of communication is based on relationships – either you have a service in place that people want or you have an offer to them that they might want to help build. Both of those are really very personal and must be done on a personal level. Most people don't have the time to check out websites - there are a million of them out there. If the service is there on the web site – that's a good way to keep them informed,



But its about personal contact – you need to get out there and wear out some shoe leather.

2. What would be the best way to learn about an organization like this?

Best Way? Through Colleagues

Participants were asked what the best way would be to learn about a new organization like ACEE, to provide some data for future outreach initiatives. The favoured response was through word of mouth, due to the added credibility this method provides. A discussion with a trusted peer about ACEE brought more integrity to the organization, and participants stated they were much more likely to then “check it out” for themselves. This finding reflects responses from Question 1 as well, in emphasizing personal, face-to-face contacts and communications. Suggestions included hosting more regional and local meetings of stakeholders, information meetings for teachers, workshops, sponsoring a speaker series, and hosting panel discussions and other events. Members of the formal education community felt that they knew little about ACEE, and recommended more direct outreach to teachers.

7. Probably by a third party, someone I respect, like from Trina, her team does great work, so if she tells me it's a good group I know it's a good group. Instead of the ED saying its great, networking through other people. ACEE should emphasize this, may be have more regional meetings, more information sessions to bring in other non-formal groups.

13. Best way? For front line folks, educators, the folks that are out there on the ground. They are in the field doing the stuff on the ground, and basically ask “what do you have for me?”

4. Probably as a credibility piece: to hear from someone what is it that they are doing / delivering. Are they filling a gap / helping other organizations? Through reputation and word of mouth. They won't have ads, or specific programs in that way, so a lot depends on their reputation.

6. Best way?? Wish I knew! We've done the direct contact approach – we spend a lot of time at teachers conventions.... As direct face to face contact and then follow up after, its the most difficult as it takes time, but you reach teachers best this way. Go to more conferences, host info meetings for teachers at staff meetings, those kinds of things. Don't spend more on brochures.

5. Probably through periodic face to face events, or where you can see them doing things, like highlighting EE leaders across the spectrum, highlighting lesson plans, teacher's needs assessments, panel discussions.



One interviewee suggested some ideas to profile both ACEE and its resources:

11. They could use events to encourage people to go to their online resources (such as collation of lesson plans or case studies or speakers – a series of recognized leaders of different forms of EE or best practices, under different topics, organizations for support resources. A combination could be good: face-to-face and electronic.

Three interviewees, all working within the formal education system, had some concerns about ACEE's profile – and stated that they know little about ACEE or its' purpose. Several other participants also felt that ACEE needed to promote itself more, especially with teachers.

2. ...what they are doing right now is NOT working! I did not know anything about them, it is a large group and I was not aware of them, and yet I work in the mainstream of education. I've been involved in education for a million years – whatever they are doing is NOT working right now – I had no idea who they were.

12. I knew nothing about them before the conference.... And I am still not totally aware of their direction. As a new member of the group, I don't understand their philosophy and direction. Perhaps there should be some kind of intro ?

3. There are a lot of teachers now out there that are not aware of ACEE at all... they have to get better at outreach.

Theme 2: Stakeholder Contributions / Efficacy

These questions focused on participants' roles with ACEE, and their experiences with the Board, different initiatives and working committees. Interviewees were asked if they felt their roles on the Board and various committees were well defined.

3. Tell me about your experiences with the committee / Board:

Do you feel your role is clear and well-defined?

Do you feel that your skills and contributions have been optimized?

Four Board members were interviewed, and all of them felt their roles were unclear at the start, which was understandable, given the newness of the organization. They felt that role clarity was improving with time, and were generally pleased with the level of communication and direction from the ED.

3. Wasn't when I volunteered, not at all, but it is improving with time. It is evolving – we are still in the storming stage. We didn't have a role in fund raising initially, now we are. That has been a bit of a challenge. There is good communication overall.



4. We have been defining the roles as we go, and so there is more clarity now, but it is in process. We are reaching a level of maturity now where we can better define roles – wear specific hats. It is ever evolving. However, if I were new, I'd be looking for a bit more clarity I think.

Two participants had participated in the polling initiative meeting and correspondence, and felt positive about their contributions.

2. Yes I think so – it was a productive meeting, we learned about polling and what some previous polls had shown and worked together to generate some questions for the group we got the meeting objective accomplished. The communications was OK, but it was a full day.

12. The polling initiative committee is a very new committee. I think that efforts have been made to define the roles such as members providing input of key areas/topics and Ipsos Reid overseeing the “how to” of polling and format of questions. Also the project has been set up to allow people to comment at the different stages of development and the process. It is still on-going but I'm impressed with the process and the general facilitation.

Two interviewees were part of the framework delivery initiative, and were pleased with the process, and with the role of the ACEE Education Coordinator in communicating and support.

5. Its been positive around the framework delivery – has been an inclusive process, with good facilitation and follow up to the final framework (e.g. following up to ask where we're at against our action areas and enabling us to update this to their website).

13. It has really helped to have Aliza come on board, she has given lots of support and prompts us to post our stuff, get us moving.

Optimizing Committee and Board Member Skills

Participants were asked if they felt their skills and contributions had been optimized through the committee processes. Most interviewees felt they had been adequately engaged in committee processes, and stated that the ED was an organized and skilled facilitator. Two Board members supported the ED but also felt that they could have done more on the Board if asked, and felt that their skills had not been adequately tapped. Time commitments were discussed by all as a challenge to more in-depth participation on the Board / committees.

11. Yes I am a Board member and have been from the start of ACEE. Gareth is very good at searching out and assessing people's skills and making sure they are used – making use of them. He is excellent at going after what he feels he needs, and drawing people out.



10. I don't know if Gareth knows of the skills that Board members have, I feel like I could do more for the Board. Sometimes it's like there are hand-picked groups that are chosen to help out with projects and initiatives – and I don't know how they got selected or asked – as I wasn't part of that process. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to do more things.

4. They certainly seem willing to listen to other perspectives and comments and to some degree take those into account. They have shown that they are open to receiving constructive suggestion to enhance the Board in terms of representing a greater spectrum of EE – including more non-formal educators and widening the geography of members beyond Calgary and including listing of Staff and Board on the website. It's important for any organization to be willing to listen and to take criticism where it is constructive and intended to strengthen the organization. I could do more if asked I think.

One Board member requested more transparency in how members get selected for specific tasks.

10. ... the transparency of how people get assigned to tasks could be better. The Board is an amazing group of people, but there should be more ways available to contribute – in different ways. I would have loved to have been able to participate in choosing the groups for the Leadership Clinic, or helped out with the polling process. Some hand-picking of Board members goes on, how it happens is unclear.

Workload Appropriate

The workload and frequency of meetings for the Board and various committees were deemed appropriate by participants, while recognizing that there was a lot of work required of them initially to get the organization and initiatives going.

4. They have been better lately! When you are starting an organization there is a lot of work initially and we had to meet a lot. We have reached a stage where we can back off more now – so it was busy initially but now we can be more hands-off on the day to day operations and let the staff do their work.

5. Its been about the right amount – hasn't been too heavy – they are open to checking timelines with us as well, e.g. for the polling committee, to see if it is working. They do checks on the process, again its been good leadership and facilitation.

12. I think the workload is OK – I haven't had to do much toward the policy piece.

11. I spend a fair bit of time on ACEE stuff –I'd say about an hour a day. But I enjoy it – it doesn't seem onerous.

Good Leadership an Important Factor

The leadership and facilitation of the Board and committees were seen as very good – participants commended the skills of the Executive Director in providing thorough



background materials, communicating effectively, being responsive to member needs and encouraging further participation (or, as one Board member put it: “...*lighting a fire under my butt to get me to do things!*”). Overall the ED received good support and many compliments.

3. Excellent. We have had some issues this year that we had to walk through carefully in terms of external communications. Gareth is a very good strategic thinker, he’s very organized in terms of laying stuff out for us, and I really appreciate that.

4. Many of the ACEE Board are environmentalists – I am an environmental professional, I am not an activist, and we have to be very careful that when we give a message out that it’s a balanced message. Earlier on a few of us felt the message was not appropriate. Gareth was quick to take responsibility for it, I like that as a leader, it is important to listen, own up, make some changes in direction based on the advice you et, and to set guidelines that are clear and transparent – so we al know what and why decisions are made.

12. Great – Gareth is responding and evolving as the organization starts to get grounded and grows. At first it was harder, he is in a learning process as well... he is very responsive to feedback which is great.

One Board member spoke to feeling somewhat shut down by articulate members who take the floor and monopolize the time for participation. Other methods of contributing could be initiated to ensure that all members have a chance to contribute, such as time for written commentary during a meeting, round table check-ins, and follow-up email solicitations.

10. There are excellent people who participate and yet when someone like (RM) speaks to an issue, he has the floor. He is brilliant but I know he shuts down other people as he is so articulate it is almost hard to say anything further, he says it all. I think there needs to be other ways to contribute, other avenues. We are not all fast on our feet.

Opportunities for Participation in ACEE Adequate

4. Do you feel like you have any power to contribute to decisions made by ACEE?

Do you feel connected to / listened to /or well represented by the organization?

Would you like to have more input into ACEE?

Would you like to have more say in how the organization is run / its priorities? How?

Interviewees that were not on the ACEE Board or part of any working committees were also asked about their opportunities to participate in decisions made by ACEE. All felt that there were openings for their participation if they wanted to contribute, while most



cited a lack of time or direct association with ACEE's mandate as reasons for not participating more fully.

1. Yes, I was approached by Gareth, we talked about ACEE's goals. I expressed my concern that I didn't see the rationale for it, but was open to being convinced.
2. Yes I have had lots of opportunity to provide opinions and input. I will speak up, I'm not someone to sit back.
6. I have given them feedback through personal conversations with Gareth and some connections with their communications folks. There has been an openness to listen in ACEE, the individuals and processes are there to listen and be reactive, which is good.

Interviewees were asked if they wanted more input into ACEE's work or direction. All participants but one stated that they were limited in the time they had to participate, and felt that at this stage they were happy with the amount of input they were contributing.

2. Not at this stage... I can devote a small amount of my time to ACEE. I am being contacted by Gareth on a number of occasions for information sharing. Polling, telephone conferences, it is pushing it to get involved further. I am supportive but can't dedicate myself to any projects now.

5. There's probably a difference between want/would like to, because I'm excited by the potential of this organization, versus capability due to current commitments. At the moment we are a bit short-staffed and I am over-committed.

12.. No – am comfortable with the relationship.

7. Sure! I am just learning more about them now – I attended the Leadership Clinic, and I'm curious to know how ACEE links to what we do. Now that I know more I'd like to learn more, to see if I have a role to play.

Board Recommendations: A Broader, More Reflective Perspective

Several Board members provided recommendations on how they felt the Board's work and processes could be improved. These included building more reflection into the Board decision-making process to accommodate more inclusive participation, exploring the option of sub-committees to engage more people in decision-making, celebrating the successes of member groups, developing a Board learning plan, and broadening the Board membership to include both a range of formal and non-formal educators as well as broader geographical representation across the province.

10. I think we as a Board need to build more reflection into the process. Reflection on decisions is so important, and yet it is missing somehow in ACEE. Gareth moves very quickly and efficiently towards goals, he's an action kind of guy, he's product-oriented and gets lots done, but needs to draw the Board in a bit more around process. I'd say have some other ways Board members can



contribute, like a written / comments process – as well as maybe a more formal oral commentary process – and also more time to reflect and consider decisions.

10. I would like to see more responsibility for ACEE goals and objectives achieved by the membership not by only by the ACEE Ed and Board. Transfer of ownership into the membership or the community we serve. I feel there is not enough time and collaboration among groups – and see ACEE missed opportunities to engage our audience. Also, more opportunity for inclusion in the Board work. Clarification of the board roles. A skills inventory of Board members to know what we can offer and how we want to be involved, instead of hand picking for efficiency
Outline for a Board learning plan – what do we want out of this experience, what can we offer?

4. It would be nice to have more direct interaction with the Board - time and geography precludes this. It would be nice to develop a more effective sub-committee process to engage a wider audience in high level decision making. Gareth and I have talked about the need to put the collective work of the organization ahead of any individual efforts or actions. The leadership associated with ACEE engages this initiative because they support the collective actions expressed by the community. As such all effort should be made to promote the organization, collective achievement and environmental action. Recognition should be directed to member groups and people who champion the efforts to attain goals, complete tasks and achieve success.

11. The Board members are invited now, not elected from their members, that has a positive benefit in that they have continuity, but it has a drawback in that they always have to be on top of ensuring that the Board and ACEE broadly is plugging in to all the different types of education deliverers that they are hoping to network and help work together. For Board members, they should work towards having members from the spectrum of deliverers – formal, the k-12, post-secondary folks, non formal, these are the community group deliverers, larger NGO with programs, major youth club organizations. There’s also room for a member with media connections, informal educators, like an environmental journalist, green TV program, green radio program editor or host. Members that have different geographic locations and ecological interests would help diversify the perspective also.

3. At the open ACEE Board meeting held at Trails to Sustainability conference, a comment made was that if they didn’t have representation from around the province they couldn’t communicate as well.... they need to have some broader representation.

Theme 3: ACEE Goals / Purpose

5. In your own words, what is the main goal of ACEE ?

Probe – what do you think it was designed to do?

Interviewees were asked to state the goal of ACEE in their own words, to gauge how they view the organization and help understand how successful ACEE’s messaging has been. Explicit goals that are clearly communicated to all players and participants are an essential element of program success. The majority of respondents responded that the



goal of ACEE was to advance EE in the province. ACEE's overall mission and purpose seemed clear to the interviewees – the majority understood what it was set up to do. ACEE seems to be on the right track with its general messaging.

2. To raise awareness of EE and how it can be incorporated into many facets of life.
3. To try to take the status quo of EE, which is pretty poor in Alberta and bring it to more peoples' consciousness and do it through existing organizations by equipping them, acting as a conduit of information, providing direction.
4. I see ACEE coalescing the EE movement and driving that forward within Alberta, and taking a leadership role at a national level as well
5. Promote EE and support EE educators in delivering the best quality EE possible (to ultimately help make their vision come true)!
7. I think ACEE looks at advancing EE in Alberta through public awareness training and providing a network.
9. To promote high standards for EE and allow a forum for networking in Alberta.
10. To provide a place for EE groups to network, come together, get supported in Alberta.
13. Providing a centralized common voice for EE in Alberta

ACEE Rationale

6. Was it necessary to create ACEE? Is it needed? Why? / Why not?

Interviewees were also asked if ACEE was needed – was it necessary to create ACEE, and why? Is there a perceived need for the services ACEE provides? Most participants responded positively to this question, and cited the need for an umbrella group who could adequately network and coordinate the many stakeholders involved in EE.

5. Yes. There are a lot of people delivering EE around the province, but not a lot of coordination on how that happens or coordinating messages or helping some of those non formal community-based groups improve their EE outreach in the community.
8. Yes - I've been involved in EE since the early 80's and what I see is that there are a lot of initiatives out there and they are not making a huge difference. I don't think that we as educators are doing enough now to make a big difference. I feel like there are things going on in Alberta but that they are pretty fragmented. Groups need to come together. There are lots of people with lots of messages, this bombards teachers, overloads them. There is a need for a group to be the umbrella, the one-stop-shopping spot.
9. I think so, we need a central place where EE groups can come together, where you can build community, network, support one another.



However, there were four exceptions, which bear examining: respondents cited a lack of clarity around target audience, concerns of duplication of effort between ACEE and existing groups, a question around ACEE’s legitimacy with some groups - whether ACEE had conducted a needs assessment before they were formed, and concerns around redirecting funds away from other existing groups.

2. I don’t know. It is pretty early but is it really important to have yet another group? I’m thankful for the people that are dedicated to it, but I am not sure if the group will achieve its goals. I guess I am unclear as to its audience – is it teachers? Or the public? Or both? It seems very large and somewhat unfocussed to me.

4. As a funder I look at duplication, and wonder is this work happening somewhere else already?? I don’t know enough about ACEE’s audience or if they did a needs assessment before they formed.

6. No. ACEE was saying we should be here and then we should be supported because we are here. Part of the concern that I had was that ACEE pre-supposed that there was no interconnection between organizations, that Alberta was a blank slate. If ACEE wants to put on a conference every year to bring people together and send out a newsletter these are useful roles. – but beyond that my feeling was that the various organizations were connecting as much as they wanted to be. And that the value they’d get out of ACEE was minimal for the funds needed to set it up. To create an entire organization whose raison d’etre was to network, that was not needed. Also, ACEE has taken funds away from other groups.

7. I’m not sure, I think there is a lot of overlap. What is their audience? It seems like it is getting broader but still educator focused. Perhaps they need to look at their mission if they want to attract other groups. There’s a role to provide a voice for smaller organizations, that’s a valuable role. But not to set up as the voice of EE in Alberta.

These responses reflect a need for further outreach and clarification around why ACEE is a necessary organization for Alberta EE, by profiling its accomplishments, and targeting specific audiences more directly.

Broad Support for ACEE’s Collaborative Mission

7. What do you think of ACEE’s Vision and Mission – does it have relevance for you / your organization’s work?

ACEE does not articulate specific “goals,” in its strategic plan, but instead states a broad vision and mission, as follows:

ACEE Vision

Alberta is a leader in environmental education, with citizens that are informed and motivated to live more sustainably, be responsible stewards of the environment, and help ensure future generations’ quality of life.



ACEE Mission

To work collaboratively to advance environmental education in Alberta.

ACEE's visions and mission statements were read out to the interviewees, and they were asked if the statements had relevance for their own organization's work. All interviewees supported the statements - even the participants who did not feel that ACEE was a necessary organization - and felt that the organization's collaborative intent was very relevant to their work.

2. Yes – we have many organizations that we want to work collaboratively with, and that's very good. Education is very complex – some is occurring in a very formal setting in schools, but we need education in lots of aspects in our lives, and any way that an organization supports that is a positive thing.

4. Yes, we need people that have a grounding in environmental education. EE literacy needs to be embedded in our culture at all levels.

9. Absolutely – our mandate is to protect and educate and create stewardship opportunities and stewards. Part of this vision is to create a culture of stewardship.

12. Yes the vision very much does because we are all about encouraging responsible stewardship of the environment. The mission – I very much agree with the collaborative aspect and it's good to have a short, succinct mission statement.

One participant sent in the following suggestion by email after our interview:

5. I'm not sure it's about advancing EE which sounds more self-serving than 'working to support and share best practices among the range of environmental educators in Alberta to help them realize the vision'. Here is an example from another network organization – the Alberta Stewardship Network: *To provide Alberta's stewards with a network that facilitates information exchange, provides support, and recognizes the contribution of individuals, communities and organizations in advancing environmental stewardship on a watershed basis.*" E.g. could be "To provide Alberta's environmental educators with a network that provides support, information exchange and recognizes the contribution of schools, community groups, [news media] in advancing quality environmental education in Alberta"

Some Concerns Around ACEE's Audience

Several interviewees expressed a lack of clarity around ACEE's audience, which they felt was made more confusing by the broad mission and vision statements. This sentiment was echoed in other responses given around the need for ACEE, and is discussed further under Question 6.

1. One of the main difficulties I have with ACEE is that I don't know who it is they are actually serving. I thought it was to represent people who were not represented and bring them together. ACEE has evolved into something much broader. "We are going to



represent environmental groups” – what do you mean? I think it is becoming too unfocused, I really don’t see where it’s going and who it’s serving? The second meeting that I had, with ACEE Board members – I told them I thought ACEE was trying to be everything to everyone – they are so broad that no one sees themselves in it.

8. I have some confusion around who the audience is for ACEE – this makes the group a bit more difficult to access for me. Is it just teachers? Is it anyone interested in EE in Alberta? Maybe it needs to be a bit more specific – or have sub groups?

2. What is the audience of ACEE? I’m making the assumption that it’s anyone interested in EE in the province – a big audience. Hard to target that size of group.

6. The EE definition that we have heard from Gareth in the past is vague. Are you an environmental group? An environmental education group? An education group? What would you coordinate? We are in the same boat and we feel that we don’t need coordination. I keep coming back to “What is your focus? Your audience?” I know at first we were told that teacher training wasn’t going to happen – now it is. It feels like ACEE is in the business of other groups.

Endorsing ACEE’s Main Areas of Activity

8. What about the 3 main areas of activity that ACEE has proposed to do: Are these the correct priorities for ACEE to tackle? Why / Why not?

Interviewees were also asked about the 3 main areas of activity that ACEE has proposed for the coming years. The three main impacts were read out to the participant during the interview to ensure reaction on the specific activities, as follows:

Impact #1: Society increasingly values, supports, and implements environmental education. ACEE will use polling and policy analysis to create a case for change to public policy, and then communicate what we learn to all stakeholders.

Impact #2: Environmental educators more effectively mobilize learners to practice environmental stewardship. A variety of training and capacity-building programs will enhance the professional development and organizational competencies of both formal and non formal educators and education groups.

Impact #3: A coordinated network of stakeholders collaborate to advance environmental education in Alberta.

Generally the activities and impacts were supported by most respondents. There was good support expressed for the research activities of polling and policy analysis. This



research emphasis was seen as a good role for ACEE to take on, as interviewees felt these initiatives were things that their own organizations would not take on. ACEE's networking role was the activity most supported by the respondents (9 of 13 respondents, or 70%).

7. I think their work on figuring out current trends and providing a big picture through polls etc. are good. I like the idea of the polling and policy analysis, as we wouldn't do this ourselves so they are playing an important role here. By sharing the research it really helps all groups. The networking impact is great – they've nailed it.

9. I see the networking as the biggest priority at the moment.
The society as a whole one is a bit grand - you have to start with getting the people that are doing the work together. I think you need to get the team together first and coordinate work being done.

8. I think it starts with a coordinated network, this goes back to the purpose of ACEE –bringing groups together is the main priority, that's about a common language. I am not sure about mobilizing learners to practice environmental stewardship – who are those learners?? That's one questions – are these adult learners/ students? that's a pretty big audience!

11. Yes – they are big jobs all of them – and we have set out to tackle several – a bit daunting in ways. However I think this is a strong team and we collectively can do a great deal.

Concerns noted by some interviewees included a sense of “lobbying” and aggressiveness in some of the wording used in the impact statements, a further questioning of any prior needs assessments and consultations before ACEE developed the activities, concern about overlapping roles of existing groups - especially teacher professional development (PD), and concern around specific language that seemed “self-serving”.

1. That sounds like a lobby group to me, the first Impact statement, that's what lobby groups do. It struck me as a bit presumptuous, there is a sense of pushiness about it.
Some government people who have heard about the polling and policy work they are doing say “Who are these guys and how dare they? ”Sometimes you have to stick your neck out there – so I understand how Gareth is trying to do this, but it comes across as a bit too much of the hammer and not enough of the collaboration that they talk about.

2. My question is do the other organizations *want* to be networked by ACEE? Do they see a need for ACEE? It may not be a priority for them to be networked with a lot of other groups. Were they asked?

6. The first and third are fine, the second is not. In my view and what we were told in initial discussions when ACEE was being formed, was that ACEE was not going to do anything, they were going to be a networking initiative – now we are talking about directly providing PD to teachers. Who is who? There is a lot of overlap here and confusion.

12. An umbrella organization that targets such a large scope may not support the individuals out there. I don't know if an umbrella organization will do it – I think ACEE needs to explore diff options. It might be too broad of a group to effectively target the public and individuals. Perhaps more local chapters or contact people would be more effective.



5. #3 – to advance EE in Alberta – I’m not sure of the wording, again it sounds self-serving – almost like promoting EE without a reason why. They should include more specifics, like an understanding of ecology, and ethic and practice of citizenship /stewardship etc., etc.

7. I think they are good but I think the first one is a bit odd, or perhaps self-serving. Why do we care if society values EE ?? Why is it important? We want society to value the environment and education is one way to get there.

Theme 4: Stakeholder Communications

9. How have general communications been for you from ACEE, about what it is doing?

Probe: do you find the amount of info you receive adequate? Anything lacking?

Respondents were asked about the general communications they receive from ACEE. Communications and promotion are key elements that can spell success or failure for any program, specifically the internal and external communication processes that both steer and promote the program. All felt that the amount and frequency of communications was adequate, although one interviewee asked for more directed email communications to be sent out when something “big” is going on, so that events and opportunities were less apt to get lost in the “email jungle”.

Responses to the ACEE **e-newsletter** (“EE in Alberta”) were mixed – eight of the 13 respondents receive the newsletter but read it sparingly. The five other interviewees stated that they do not receive the newsletter (one did at one time but does not now, and another knows it is due to a system “firewall” that blocks its uptake.) One respondent asked for the option of receiving a hard copy of the newsletter – an interesting option to consider for rural stakeholders that do not have high-speed internet connection.

2. It goes into my junk mail - I have a firewall that it doesn’t get through.

5. I get the newsletter although I find that I have very little time to read them – I glance at them.

7. Yes I get it. It keeps me informed but I’d prefer to get a hard copy. I’ll sit with a hard copy longer than email and keep it if its valuable, versus an email that just gets filed and then forgotten. I’m on dial up so I don’t surf around much! I think they should ask people what their preferred method of receiving information is. I know that I’d like to get the newsletter in print form, as would some of our more rural partners. We print our newsletter out and do a small mailing for folks who want this. I like paper copies, and many rural folks we deal with like this too. You may have more buy-in if you get the information in the method you prefer. At least they should ask people what they’d want.



Two respondents suggested that the format of the newsletter be changed so that there is a table of contents right up front that you can scan quickly to see what the contents are, then click on or scroll down to something that is relevant to check out.

4. ...if it was formatted with the headlines at the top to then link to the information, that's a good way to do it, as it saves you time when you glance at it – you can then find the topics that interest you quicker.

One interviewee suggested specific sections for different audiences that ACEE reaches:

7. It comes back to who the ACEE audience is too – maybe the newsletter needs to have boxes or sections for specific audiences: teachers / interpreters / whatever.

Have you used the ACEE on-line Resource Centre?

How often?

What do you use it for?

Respondents were also asked about the ACEE website – the on-line Resource Centre. Only three of the 13 interviewees have visited the site; the others stated that due to being very busy they lacked time to explore it.

2. No –I haven't looked at it or used it

3. Not at all – I need to go there to contribute but don't have time.

4. Not yet but I know its there

6. Sometimes I check it when directed to go and look at something

9. Looked at it the other day – we have our stuff posted there – I think it's posted twice?

I want to ask you about the **Needs Assessment Survey** done last spring – April 2007

Did you complete the needs assessment survey? (if not, why not??)

Respondents were also asked if they had participated in the ACEE **Needs Assessment Survey**, which was done in April 2007. Only one respondent out of 13 recalled receiving it, but did not fill it out due to time constraints. All participants noted that they were amenable to on-line surveys, as long as they were not too time consuming to complete. This is good feedback to apply to future surveys that ACEE might undertake – keep them short and sweet and have a “carrot” or prize to entice greater participation.

5. I did get it though and even a reminder, but was too busy to fill it out as we are short staffed.

13. Was there a prize for doing it? That makes a difference to me – as petty as that sounds!

Theme 5: Capacity Building of Organizations

10. Do you think that being part of ACEE has benefited you / your organization ?

Please explain:



One of ACEE's main goals is capacity building of EE stakeholder groups. Respondents were asked if being associated with ACEE and its programs had benefited themselves or their organizations. The majority felt that they had benefited personally, through participation on the Board and on various committees, but that it was too early to tell if their organization had benefited from associations with ACEE. However, the four participants in the recent Leadership Clinic were very positive about the experience, and all felt their organizations had benefited greatly from the clinic.

4. Yes absolutely. Personally the relationships that I've developed with folks that are involved have been very enriching. Professionally, it has been an enriching experience as well, and continues to be so – there are many wonderful people involved in ACEE that represent a variety of perspectives.

7. Yes - The Leadership Clinic was great, it is pretty unique, no one else is offering that. Having that big block of time was great, it was well designed. It strengthened our ties with each other, we are closer I think.

8. The Leadership Clinic was a real benefit – we spend a significant amount of time there. It was the gift of time spent together that really made it worthwhile.

9. Yes - everything you can do to create synergies with organizations. to make them aware of what exists, what resources are out there, is important. ACEE is another venue for people to hear about what's available.

11. I'd say personally it has benefited me – not my organization as yet.

One group felt that ACEE conferences have been targeted more for the formal education audience, and so did not meet their needs.

5. It's too early to tell. We haven't attended any workshops beyond the developing the framework and the Trails to Sustainability conference. I found the conference way more geared to formal education than non formal and informal, and so it didn't meet my needs as I had hoped. I was hoping for more relevance for us and for stewardship groups. They need to be a bit more inclusive – and I think they will, eventually.

6. I would say no, maybe because we haven't been involved. We have been looking for opportunities to connect better with ACEE.

The Value of Networks

11. Do you belong to any other educational or environmental networks? Why do you belong to them? - What is the value to you of membership in any network?

ACEE has a main objective of developing and hosting a network of EE practitioners around the province. In order to gauge the different values of membership in any



network, respondents were asked if they belonged to any other educational or environmental networks, and the reasons why they joined them.

A main reason given was the shared learning that a network provides: elements gained through good networks included recommended resources, current innovations, profiles of best practices and upcoming events that help build capacity and connect organizations. Respondents also stressed the importance of face-to-face networking opportunities in addition to the electronic connections, and several people suggested profiling member groups on-line in order that the community could be kept current with different projects and initiatives.

3. To hear about resources available, initiatives, innovations, at the forefront of their field in whatever network. To learn from others to improve programs get good examples of delivery methods and strategies, to learn about good practices, being able to overcome obstacles together, bringing people with different perspectives together to overcome problems, make the movement stronger.

4. The shared learning of the networks: being connected, having an understanding of what's happening in your world, in your community – an awareness of what's going on, where there may be opportunities for collaboration.

7. Mostly the networking, meeting with peers, finding out what's going on, I like to see what's on the radar, what do groups need help with. I work at home, you get isolated, and need to make an effort to get out there.

8. Its about getting information – I look to them for recommendations around resources, events, good books on topics I am working on. There are resources around best practice – resources, readings they recommend, to stay in touch with what's going on, what is moving the field right now in terms of research and practice.

Some specific requests were made for case studies and group profiles on the web site:

9. If there are exemplary programs, it would be good to highlight them, allow opportunities to have a case study of it, so others can learn from examples that are succeeding. The Leap into Action workshop, the best part of it was getting inspired by the case studies and the things that are working. If ACEE could share opportunities like that on their web site, say “Joe Blow has a great wetland program, so come down and see it on Thurs. “ – that would be useful.

5. Many of us – NGO and GOs – have collected or are trying to collect case studies and highlight champions or early adopters– perhaps there could be a facility on the ACEE website or featured at events, which incorporates those collected case studies from different organizations under main topic headings?

13. Networks are important communication tools to keep up on what is going on in the sector, in your area of work. Case studies on the website, like profiles of different groups would be great – give a sense of who's out there and what they are doing.

One respondent felt that ACEE was targeting too broad an audience, and therefore felt that the network was too diluted to be of use.

1. A good network provides a very clear and distinct service or set of services, and are very focused. They put on a conference, build community, let people know what others are doing,



bring people together - its simple, and provides a distinct service. Networks are so complex – you begin to lose yourself in them... you need to have a clear purpose and service, otherwise why would anyone belong to them?

Theme 6: Assessment of ACEE Professional Development

12. Have you been to any ACEE conferences or workshops?
Was the session worthwhile? Applicable to your work?

One of ACEE's main goals is to support and strengthen environmental education organizations. Interviewees were asked about the conferences, workshops and presentations ACEE has hosted over the past two years and how applicable and useful they were. Respondents were positive about the sessions they attended and cited the networking and peer learning opportunities as highlights.

Recent ACEE conferences and workshops were asked about, and listed for the respondents as well, in order to refresh their memories, as follows:

- Trails to Sustainability Conference Kananaskis May 2007
- Rick Kool workshop: early 2007
- GEOEC 2008 Nordegg, Alberta

Four participants had not attended any of the PD sessions, and as the Leadership Clinic was assessed separately, its impacts were not discussed with interviewees..

5. I did go to the Rick Kool workshop, it was good, there was some nice theory to learn from the value of nature and the outdoors.

8. Yes, I was a presenter at both of them(conferences). Yes they were very worthwhile. The networking at these events is so important, more than the sessions.

10. The PD sessions are excellent. I think ACEE could do more of that work in partnership with other groups, it is a good role for them. We could even consider hosting a "series" of events that convened a variety of groups around common issues.

11. The Rick Kool workshop was a good event. Perhaps the best part of the day was the informal session afterwards at a restaurant that provided an opportunity for people to reflect on the session and glean some direction for what it meant for them and their work directly. This was also a great networking opportunity - a role ACEE can always play. After all, we really are just a dating service.....

12. The conference was an excellent event because it gathered together three kindred organizations in a fashion that created an event that was more than any of them could have done on their own with a single event. This event really emphasizes the value ACEE can add by playing a convening role multiple groups for an event such as this.



Theme 7: Past Successes and Future Directions

13. What is the main aspect of ACEE that you feel is the most successful? Why?

In the final part of the interview, participants were asked about their perceptions of program success, and future directions for ACEE. Generally, respondents felt that the program had been successful in meeting a need in the EE community by networking a variety of groups and players, taking a collaborative approach, in developing a useful model of capacity building in the Leadership Clinic. This is interesting information to apply to ACEE's outreach models, as their networking and collaborative approach are highly valued, and therefore should be profiled.

3. Connecting to other individuals is important – we have made connections as a result of ACEE – things haven't resulted from that yet, but everyone is busy. It is important to work on and use the influence that ACEE has to contribute to provincial curriculum – that is only the beginning.

4. The convenings – the Trails to Sustainability conference, the multi stakeholder groups that met across the province, the Leadership Clinic - ACEE has been successful in bringing multi stakeholder groups together, reaching out beyond the more narrow sector to include many players in the community.

5. The seeking out of the collaborative approach – having follow up or check-in points with groups – I like their approach of being collaborative and following up – getting stakeholders involved in all parts of the organization's development.

7. The PD sessions, especially the Leadership Clinic - and the networking, keeping people connected, we are a pretty broad group and they bring us together specifically.

8. I think that their focus should be bringing like groups together and creating a common language, a culture of EE in Alberta. To develop some force, some power to effect change, a connected group. One stop shopping aspect is also important.

11. I'd say the role of convening a variety of groups to create a more directed, action oriented and outcome based approach to EE and related issues to a wide range of audiences.

Concerns With ACEE

14. Do you have any concerns with ACEE?

Are there aspects that you'd like to change about ACEE and what it does?? Elaborate -

Interviewees were also asked to cite any concerns or aspects they would like to change about ACEE and what it does. Suggestions ranged from wanting ACEE to accomplish some concrete projects to develop more of a track record to including more non-formal education sector content, and ensuring that the language used in their communications and documents is more inclusive and targeted to specific audiences. The request for more



“action” and concrete products from ACEE is an important one for the staff to consider, as ACEE moves from being a fledgling organization into its third year of operation.

2. They don't need to be telling people how to think, they need to model what they are doing – its not by telling, its by doing. As soon as you start telling people things, they back away. We are dealing with a lot of knowledgeable people and they have done a lot of things, so be very careful of the approach that you use. Embrace people where they are at, support them, and model what you want them to do. It has to be authentic – ACEE wants to tell people how to think, but they need to do more – and let people think for themselves, be open, embrace peoples' ideas.

3. ACEE needs to start focusing on action plans and go out and achieve smaller steps, start something concrete. We need to get some concrete stuff done so people can see the results, myself included.

5. I am always looking for that they are meeting the needs of non-formal educators as well. Some mention between who the actors are – they seem to be specifically targeting formal educators in some areas where a reciprocal/suitable action could be for non-formal educators. Be more inclusive. For example, their Model schools, Outcome # 4, “quality and effectiveness in EE” – they could be looking at informal and non formal education as well. Schools / best practices are all formal education focused. It would be nice to get some models and best practices in the non-formal sector as well – more inclusive of other groups community groups, larger organizations. This is a small weakness and I think they are trying to get there and obviously actions would need to be prioritized as can't do everything all at once – but something I noticed.

12. If we can look at ways to support community groups that are out there trying to persuade their communities to be more sustainable, - this is the on-the-ground work that makes a difference at a community level. What about the stewardship groups?

There was repeated concern about ACEE potential to compete with or duplicate on-going work:

6. To remember the mandate that ACEE was given by the initial workshops – to be a network. The verbage at the round table was “don't create another mouth to feed” yet my concern is that we have done this. I don't know how ACEE can avoid being competitive with the organizations that it means to support. ACEE said initially that they wouldn't be doing programs - they are doing program when they weren't set up to do this, such as teacher PD, facilitation of workshops.

One respondent made some specific comments on language used in the upcoming public poll, while another suggested specific word changes for a teacher audience. These suggestions should be considered when ACEE develops promotional and workshop materials.

5. One comment: the poll that we are working on – the vision of ACEE talks about citizens *'informed and motivated to live more sustainably, be responsible stewards of the environment'* - this language is inclusive and implies we are living in the environment, and we need to make decisions in everyday practice to look after 'it' and use its resources responsibly – but the *poll* for example, the language is all about *how we 'protect and preserve' the environment*, which only captures one side of the work to be done (there is also restoration, or conservation – where humans are part of the environment and seek to manage resources responsibly). It also places 'the environment' as something over there not where you are. Having this language front and



centre may also be divisive which may turn off the very people we want to reach. This language presupposes a certain perspective on the environment - we need to be careful that we are not giving just a narrow perspective could be off putting to some people and turn them away – we need to watch language – what they are saying is meeting their messaging needs, and not isolating the very people who we hope to influence.

8. Can't speak intelligently about it as I don't know enough. There are a few small things like simple things like wording change – they should use *professional learning* as opposed to *professional development* opportunities. I don't like to hear about *training* – use “*a learning and capacity building session*” instead. This resonates better with teachers. If you are talking to a teacher audience, know your audience.

Should ACEE be a Membership Organization?

Three respondents commented on the decision of ACEE to forego the membership element as a concern. Comments included the lack of membership “belonging” lessened the sense of connectedness and ownership between stakeholders and the organization.

8. I do feel however that it is just a group out there somewhere, that I am not really a part of. Having no membership is part of this I think. Perhaps it makes ACEE feel more distant, less connected to what I do.

10. I have some concerns about losing the membership aspect of ACEE. I think that without members there is no real connection for groups to ACEE – I think the membership piece gives you more ownership of the organization, and the organization needs to be able to touch the people on the ground. How does ACEE touch the small NGO's in the province? What meaning does it have to them? I think the membership decision was a wrong one – this is a major issue for me. Having members also brings the smaller voices into the organization more – I think we need to hear from more people that just the Board members on our decisions and plans.

13. The membership question is an issue for me. I think they are missing out on the potential for ownership, for more shoulders to bear the load and contribute to ACEE. I believe in teamwork and collaboration. Is ACEE in danger of making decisions that may omit the smaller players? I think they need to hear from a broader base of voices – they are in danger of becoming elitist.

Participants were also asked about other information or support that they'd like ACEE to provide. Suggestions included more connections with post secondary institutions, support and connections to local stewardship groups, school and community projects and young naturalist groups, partnering more closely with the GEOEC through conferences, building regional networks, and hosting media literacy workshops. These are all interesting suggestions for the ACEE Board to consider.

3. I'd like to see ACEE more involved in terms of facilitating meetings and connections between post secondary institutions and the various learning councils. I tried talking to other Board members, we seem to have a strong focus at the grade school level but that doesn't help me a lot, it needs to carry right through the education system as a cohesive flow.



5. At the time when I first started with ACEE I was working as a grant administrator with the Alberta Stewardship Network. I saw all these groups on the ground that are basically non-formal educators in their communities with different degrees of experience, some more organized and sophisticated than others. These groups.... needed support in effective delivery of their messages, which communication and education tools to use, considering basic learning outcomes for talks, as well as organized opportunities to learn of good examples of EE in these circumstances and learning what is out there for resources they could tap into. Helping these groups in their delivery of EE is an area of need that ACEE could fulfill, there needs to be more dialogue around linkages between ACEE and the Alberta Stewardship Network.

9. Often with groups the members may be getting older, they are short of people to do things and they are looking for ways to connect with youth – so this is an opportunity to think of ways to link them together through practical projects or programs. There is also the Federation of Alberta Naturalists Young Naturalist Clubs which could link youngsters to their local naturalist club across the province for learning about nature.

6. A biannual conference would be really valuable, a stronger more formal connection with the GEOEC to help build their capacity. I have strong concerns about the future of GEOEC, and ACEE may be able to help out here. I think to have GEOEC focus on the teachers would be better, rather than it being a networking opportunity for the NGO community. It has become this, nothing wrong with it but is it the major focus? They need teachers to attend.

7. We had looked at a regional network - we are up near Edmonton and Gareth is in Canmore – if we could connect with our local EE groups that would be valuable. Local groups here are important to connect with. Regional meetings mean less reinventing the wheel, messages are more specific and you can focus on local issues, know what your neighbours are doing.

12. Ways to “help the media work for you” workshops would be useful, even ‘ ecological literacy in the media, they could have popular newspaper journalists as presenters. It would be good if there was a way for them (ACEE) to set up some way to link schools and community groups around action project – at a strategic level.

Priorities For ACEE

15. If ACEE could focus on only one or two areas, where do you think they should concentrate their efforts?

Interviewees were asked what they thought ACEE priorities should be if they could focus on only one or two areas. Maintaining and strengthening the networking role across sectors was a common theme, echoing the areas where respondents felt that ACEE had the greatest success.

4. Maintaining that cross sector dialogue, the networking between different groups is important, as well as the policy side, helping to influence the changes at that policy level, as ACEE comes to the table in a unique position, representing a number of different voices. They are in a good position to do this work.



5. Bringing people together and sharing examples of how things work, lessons learned in delivering EE, is an important role.

13. The teacher support is really important, that is really a good way to impact a lot of kids and parents. Teachers are a network to communities – support them with resources and PD – ACEE should explore this further. They are big on trying to make change with policy – they can have some influence in that regard, but a bigger impact would be supporting teachers. Politicians will listen to the community as well, so get in the back door, communities speak loud, politicians will listen – especially to kids and schools.

7. The networking – the informal EE opportunities – there is lots out there that links to school kids and curriculum, but I'd like to see more focus on the informal public education sector. A public education focus is what I'd like to see.

Two respondents also stressed the importance of not duplicating work that is already going on, and suggested recognition of good projects and practices, and building on them.

9. I'd like to see ACEE track what's going on more, and then shift their priorities accordingly. My big concern with organizations like this is that there is duplication – everyone is trying to pull people together, and we are so busy meeting that no one is doing any work.

8. I think it goes back to their original focus, the bringing together of groups and creating a common culture and language. I think if there is one umbrella group I think more can happen – more support and thinking around societal change and education. There is power in numbers, in not duplicating things. We do not have the resources to duplicate!

Other suggestions emphasized outreach suggestions, Board role clarification, and the importance of adhering to ACEE's Strategic Plan when prioritizing activities.

10. I'd like to see a speaker series, a quarterly “touch-base” for member groups, less efficient and more effective communication techniques. Board role clarification and opportunities to participate in committees.

11. Anything ACEE does should be rooted in the strategic plan. These are the marching orders - expressed through a comprehensive community engagement process. We should be very careful about embarking on anything that is not in that plan.

Two respondents re-emphasized their concern around ACEE needing to define themselves more clearly and to have some concrete projects that they complete.

1. Be clear with their focus, know what they are about. It is hard to give them advice about where they should be going because I don't think they know themselves what they are, what they represent. Is ACEE a net? A shot gun approach? It makes me think they say “If we throw out a big enough net then something is going to get caught”, Except this is a huge use of resources for very little return.



6. I'd be interested to see where ACEE is going to go, its a bit of a "wait and see" as to how it will be used. One of the things I have been hoping is that ACEE comes up with a really good idea – I haven't seen it yet. I really want ACEE to stick around, I see the value in what they do, but think they need to define themselves more specifically and clearly.

Some Final Words

16. To close, **is there anything else you'd like to say about your experiences with the program?** Anything you'd like to ask me?

As a parting question, participants were asked if they had anything else to say about their experiences with ACEE. Several people commented on appreciating being asked to contribute, and on the organization's commitment to a third party evaluation process.

1. I congratulate ACEE on doing this evaluation – its good to work with a third party, and finding out more about what people think of them. That is good – they need to think about focus, think about relevance, and think about what they can really do effectively.

4. No – I feel quite comfortable sharing directly with the organization, but appreciate the chance to think about these questions as well. Good evaluation process.

5. It is quite a young organization, its good that's its out there and it will get stronger, it will be able to respond to needs. The communication I've received has been very good and positive. Good work so far!

6. I appreciate them going through the process of the evaluation, and doing the Ipsos Reid Poll survey, there is value in this. There is value in taking the time to do the evaluation - I really respect them for doing this, bringing in an outside evaluator who gives a different perspective on things.

7. I think it is a good organization, and I appreciate the chance to provide feedback, I have never had this opportunity with a group before. Great work so far.

10. ACEE is an important and dynamic group – I'm glad to be part of it.

12. It was nice to meet some of the board members at the conference, as the chair and Board are faceless to me. There is some solid depth there that I wasn't aware of. Knowing this about ACEE, it makes me want to be more involved.

13. Just some questions I have for ACEE - How is ACEE going to get at the learning opportunities through the other education stakeholders – those with decision-making power over content or influencing power in presence in TV programs, newspapers, radio or TV interviewers/editors, or those developing computer games? How are they going to reach this group and link them together but also link them with other forms of educators? It may be early for this – wait a year or so.



Summary and Conclusions

ACEE Profile and Promotion

Interviewees heard about ACEE primarily through the ED as well as other colleagues, this personal contact being a preferred method of communications. There was discussion with several participants about the use of electronic communications – its limits and benefits, and some suggestions for more personal contact. This desire for “warm body” communication was also supported by respondents to the May 2008 Needs Assessment survey. When asked to rank sources of information for organizations, “Personal contact with experts” and “Network meetings with colleagues” were the top two sources of information. This also builds on the strong desire for more networking and partnering that is evident throughout both the interview and survey data. This need is further emphasized by the responses to the question of what would be the best way to hear about an organization like ACEE: The favoured response was through word of mouth, due to the added credibility this method provides. However, several members of the formal education community felt that ACEE had not reached their constituents – an audience that requires more promotional effort.

Board and Committee Contributions

Participants were asked about their roles with ACEE, and their experiences with the Board, different initiatives and working committees. Clarity of purpose and participation in any committee is a key element of both maximizing and sustaining participation, and in developing ownership to an organization and/or an initiative (Justice, 2006). Board members responded that role clarity was improving with time, and were generally pleased with the level of communication and direction from the ED. The participants in the polling and policy initiatives and the framework delivery initiative were also supportive of the process, the communication and the level of leadership provided.

Optimizing Board and Committee Member Skills

Participants who feel engaged and able to authentically contribute to a meeting or initiative is key to its overall success. If one’s personal skills are well suited to the given challenges, a much higher level of engagement is possible, and therefore a better sense of control and success in an endeavor is noted (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Most interviewees felt they had been adequately engaged in committee processes, and stated that the ED was an organized and skilled facilitator.

Two Board members felt that their skills had not been adequately tapped, one requested more transparency in how members are selected for specific tasks, and another asked for a varied process in how members could contribute to Board discussions, to ensure full participation in Board discussions. The May 2008 survey of Board members also referred to Board members wanting more involvement, collaboration, and participation. There was a skills review as part of the May 2008 Board survey; it should be revisited to assess



member skills, and a further request put to members around tasks and areas of interest they would like to work on.

Workloads for both the Board and committee members were seen as adequate, and the leadership of ACEE's ED was lauded frequently.

Overall the Board members are satisfied with the protocol, workload and overall leadership provided by the ED. However, review of the written Board skills inventory survey is recommended, as well as the development of a clear process for tasking out Board duties. Instituting a variety of Board contribution methods (e.g. written commentary during a meeting, round table check-ins) may help meet some specified needs.

Opportunities for Participation in ACEE Adequate

Interviewees that were not on the ACEE Board or part of any working committees felt that there were openings for their participation if they wanted to or had time to contribute further to the organization. There seems to be a sense of openness and accessibility in ACEE, and a willingness to include all interested participants.

Board Recommendations: A Broader, More Reflective Perspective

Several Board members recommended specific ways in which they felt the Board's work and processes could be improved. Some were highlighted in the above paragraph; the remainder are summarized as follows:

- building more reflection into the Board decision-making process to accommodate more inclusive participation;
- broader membership involvement and engagement in carrying out ACEE objectives;
- developing more sub-committees to engage more people in decision-making;
- Exploring the pros and cons of an elected Board;
- Broadening the stakeholder members to encompass more community groups and non-formal educators, as well as a range of media stakeholders;
- celebrating the successes of member groups;
- broadening the Board membership to include both a range of formal and non-formal educators, and
- broader geographical representation across the province.

Overall Clarity of ACEE Goals and Purpose

When asked to state the goals of ACEE in their own words, interviewees were consistent in responded that the goal of ACEE was to advance EE in the province. This summarizes ACEE's overall mission and purpose –stakeholders understood what it was set up to do.



Well articulated goals and clear communication around purpose is an important success factor when developing, launching and running any program or organization. Explicit goals that are clearly communicated to all players and participants are an essential element of program success. Clarity of goals is also important in effective evaluation – the goals must be measurable and attainable (Weiss, 1998).

The Needs Assessment survey data (May 2008) asked about important roles for ACEE. The top two roles were to:

- “Champion environmental education. ACEE will be a voice for the advancement of environmental education, speaking in support of the need for EE and its role in a changing society.”
- “Build networks. ACEE will develop, encourage and support networks that facilitate the exchange of information and provide opportunities for collaboration within the Albertan EE community.”

A distinct definition of a new initiative is an important factor in its public profile and successful promotion, as a shared understanding is then broadcast correctly to a wider audience. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) ACEE seems to be on the right track with its general messaging. This gives ACEE some clear direction as well: as an advocate for EE and as a key supporting structure: building the network, encouraging collaboration and building capacity.

ACEE Rationale

Was it necessary to create ACEE, and why? Necessity of mission is a major factor in the success of an initiative: is there a perceived need for the services ACEE provides? Most participants cited the need for an umbrella group who could network and coordinate the many stakeholders involved in EE. This also supports the needs assessment data, which spoke to a key role for ACEE as follows:

- “Build networks. ACEE will develop, encourage and support networks that facilitate the exchange of information and provide opportunities for collaboration within the Albertan EE community.”

There was also broad support for ACEE’s collaborative focus. All interviewees supported the organization’s collaborative intent and saw the ability of ACEE to engage a wide variety of stakeholders in the EE community as relevant to their work.

Four comments bear examining: respondents cited a lack of clarity around target audience, concerns of duplication of effort between ACEE and existing groups, a question around ACEE’s legitimacy with some groups, and concerns around redirecting funds away from other existing groups. These responses reflect a need for further outreach and clarification around why ACEE is a necessary organization for Alberta EE, by profiling its accomplishments, and targeting specific audiences more directly. A “check-in” survey with stakeholder groups in the next 12 – 18 months may be a useful



way to profile ACEE's activities as well as assess ACEE's impact on the wider EE community. This could be done on a regional basis to better serve local needs.

Audience Clarification Needed

Several interviewees expressed a lack of clarity around ACEE's audience, both in discussions around ACEE's goals as well as the organizations' successes and areas for further work. The two "outlier" interviewees were strongest in stating that ACEE has too broad and vague a mandate, but they were also joined in this opinion by several other stakeholders working in different educational fields. This is an important area for the ACEE Board and staff to clarify and state succinctly. Knowing your audience and speaking directly and clearly to them is an important element of successful communication. If there is a lack of clarity amongst stakeholders, especially from an organization that is working to network and collaborate with differing groups, it is important to rectify this.

ACEE's Priority Areas of Activity Supported, Networking #1

Generally the three main impact statements and activities were supported by most respondents, with the role of ACEE as a networking agency being the most strongly supported (9 of 13 respondents, or 70%). This corresponds directly with the Needs Assessment data, which had 93% of respondents supporting collaboration and networking. Question 35 in the Needs Assessment survey ranks ACEE's role as an organization, with "Championing EE" and "Network building" being the top-ranked roles. This gives ACEE some clear direction as an advocate for EE and, as part of this support, building the network and continuing their collaborative approach. There was also good support expressed for the research activities of polling and policy analysis as a good role for ACEE to take on. The Board survey results also spoke to the importance of getting project work done "on the ground", and communicating activities and results out to others in the province – part of a stronger action and outreach initiative that ACEE should consider in the coming months.

Stakeholder Communications

Respondents were generally satisfied with the amount and type of general communications they receive from ACEE. Communications and promotion are key elements that can spell success or failure for any program, specifically the internal and external communication processes that both steer and promote the program. Responses to the ACEE **e-newsletter** ("EE in Alberta") were mixed – eight of the 13 respondents receive the newsletter but read it sparingly. One respondent asked for the option of receiving a hard copy of the newsletter – an option for ACEE to consider in reaching rural stakeholders that do not have high speed internet connection. The ACEE on-line Resource Centre was not a well-used site by the interviewees; the suggestions of profiling success stories, case studies and exemplary programs might change this.



Capacity Building of Individuals, Too Early for Organizations

One of ACEE's main goals is to build capacity within EE stakeholder groups. Almost all respondents felt that they had benefited personally through participation on the Board, on various committees, and through ACEE's conferences and professional development offerings, but that it was too early to tell if their organizations had benefited from associations with ACEE. However, the four participants in the recent Leadership Clinic were very positive about the experience, and all felt their organizations had gained greatly from the clinic.

More Connections to Stewardship Groups

An important theme in the May 2008 needs assessment survey was the inclusion of non-formal audiences in EE organizational programs (such as conferences) and further integration of non-formal and informal EE groups within ACEE. This was emphasized as being important to the theme of "getting to action." This corresponds to the responses of several interviewees who strongly suggested more contact and support for the stewardship sector, including community, youth and other volunteer groups. This audience is an important one with respect to on-the-ground action projects, and ACEE should explore how to accommodate them more fully.

Valuing Networks

What is the value of belonging to a network? Interview respondents highlighted the shared learning that a network provides: elements gained through good networks included recommended resources, current innovations, profiles of best practices and upcoming events that help build capacity and connect organizations. Respondents also stressed the importance of face-to-face networking opportunities in addition to the electronic connections, and several people suggested profiling member groups on-line in order that the community could be kept current with different projects and initiatives. Some specific requests were made for case studies of different groups and audiences, best practices, success stories, early adopters, exemplary programs that were open to stakeholder visits, and group profiles on the web site. This feedback can help ACEE tailor their network to better meet the needs of their members.

ACEE Professional Development Events Rated Positively

Interviewees responded positively when asked about the conferences, workshops and presentations ACEE has hosted over the past two years, and highlighted the quality of the sessions they attended and the networking and peer learning opportunities. ACEE was seen to be in a good position to convene conferences and workshops with partners, thereby creating a synergy and ability to produce events that were larger and of better quality than any of them could have done on their own. ACEE can add much value to the EE sector by playing a convening role and enabling multiple groups to benefit from events.



Networking a Success

Participants felt that ACEE had been successful in meeting a need in the EE community by networking a variety of groups and players. The Board survey and needs assessment data also support this finding – networking is seen as an important role for ACEE and one they have succeeded at. The collaborative approach that ACEE has maintained was also supported, even by some of the groups’ “nay-sayers”. This is interesting information to apply to ACEE’s outreach models, as their networking and collaborative approach are highly valued, and therefore should be profiled and celebrated.

Concerns With ACEE

Interviewees were asked to cite any concerns or aspects they would like to change about ACEE and what it does. Several respondents reflected comments from the May 2008 Board survey and stressed the need for ACEE to accomplish some concrete projects, in order to develop more of a track record “on the ground”. The request for more “action” and concrete products from ACEE is an important one for the staff to consider, as ACEE moves from being a fledgling organization into its third year of operation. Given the upcoming public poll, the recent Leadership Clinic, and the policy work that ACEE has embarked on, they seem well on their way to producing some of the on-the-ground “products” that respondents are looking for.

The two “outliers”, both influential stakeholders in the Alberta education sector, both questioned the rationale for ACEE’S existence, and had concerns around duplication of work already being accomplished, as well as the competitive financial challenges around supporting another EE group in a faltering economy. They also spoke to a perceived overlap in ACEE’s activities, particularly around teacher professional development. Some of these opinions seemed based in a territorial perspective, where they felt their own organizations were essentially already carrying out what ACEE purported to do. However, they both also saw value in the networking and convening role being played by ACEE across the province. Pursuing direct solicitation, outreach and collaborative approaches with these organizations, with roles and audiences clearly defined, may sway their opinion and garner more support for ACEE. Also, as ACEE completes some of its on-going initiatives over the next year, these “on-the-ground” deliverables should add to their credibility and profile.

Some Language Needs a Second Look

Concerns noted by some interviewees in the mission, vision and mandate documents of ACEE included a sense of “lobbying” and aggressiveness in some of the wording used in the impact statements, and concern around specific language that seemed “self-serving”. Specific wording suggestions were provided around the use of “supporting and sharing” instead of “advancing”, and “learning” versus “training, in order to better reflect ACEE audience cultures.



Should ACEE be a Membership Organization?

There was discussion with three of the interview respondents around the decision of ACEE to forego the membership element as a concern. Comments included the lack of membership lessened the sense of “belonging”, connectedness and ownership between stakeholders and the organization. Perhaps ACEE should be more explicit with its rationale for moving away from a membership model.

Priorities For ACEE: Stay the Networking Course

Interviewees were asked what they thought ACEE priorities should be if they could focus on only one or two areas. Maintaining, strengthening and broadening the networking role across sectors was a common theme, echoing the areas where respondents felt that ACEE had the greatest success, as well as the findings from the 2008 needs assessment survey.

Summary

Overall the interviews and stakeholder surveys paint a positive and optimistic picture of ACEE. Its mission and goals are clear to most stakeholders, and there is broad support and a clear rationale for its collaborative and networking roles. The professional development opportunities ACEE has provided, notably the recent Leadership Clinic and the 2007 Trails to Sustainability conference are ranked very highly by participants and seen as being of high value to their organizations. The ability of ACEE to convene multi-stakeholder groups in order to encourage networking, communication and partnerships and advance EE province-wide is a highly supported role and therefore should be profiled and celebrated.

The Executive Director is perceived as committed and energetic, and brings strong leadership skills and detailed organizational and administrative structure to the organization. The Education Coordinator, while new to her position, is recognized very favourably by the EE community who have worked with her, and has brought good organizational and interpersonal skills to ACEE.

Some areas that require further work include the development and profiling of concrete projects and “products” in order to build credibility and profile across the province. The Board survey results also spoke to the importance of getting project work done “on the ground”, and communicating activities and results out to others in the province – part of a stronger action and outreach initiative that ACEE should consider in the coming months. Other areas where more work is needed are clarifying and profiling ACEE’s target audiences: knowing your audience and speaking directly and clearly to them is an important element of successful communication.

Stakeholders suggested ACEE provide further outreach and promotion to teachers and other formal education stakeholders, as several interviewees felt many teachers know nothing of the organization. Other respondents felt that the greater inclusion of non-



formal and informal EE and stewardship groups throughout ACEE's activities and administrative structure would assist both ACEE's collaborative efforts as well as promoting and supporting environmental action projects and stewardship efforts across the province.

ACEE is a young organization with a very large mandate, and it has achieved a great deal in its short life span. ACEE's collaborative leadership, committed Board and current polling and policy initiatives are seen as important underpinnings of its positive evolution.

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