SEEDS Programs Empower Youth to Create Positive Change in their Community

The Gist

Empowering at-risk youth to create solutions for at-risk landscapes and ecosystems.

Challenge

SEEDS—a nonprofit organization seeking to tie together ecology, education, and design—saw a need to empower youth to create change that would improve their communities while helping them learn valuable life skills.

Overview

In 1999, three graduate design students from Michigan State University had an idea to create a company that would incorporate ecology as a design ally. Their idea grew into Seeking Ecology Education and Design Solutions (SEEDS), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to find solutions-multipliers at the local level that address global issues. One example of that is stormwater management.

SEEDS advocates designing road surfaces that shed stormwater into swale forms that filter contaminants and recharge groundwater tables instead of the common practice of draining the water into concrete pipes headed straight for surface waters.

After ten years of providing professional services to communities and organizations, the SEEDS leadership team decided they wanted to get more intentional about empowering youth to create change. They reasoned that when youth grow up with a solution-based mindset, they are better able to solve current challenges while preventing other problems from emerging.
At the same time, Bill Watson, an area youth specialist, had a vision for a Michigan Youth Conservation Corps and was looking for an organization that could help him develop the program. SEEDS turned out to be a good fit. Watson and Sarra Salzman, SEEDS’ executive director, began working together on an ambitious grant application to the Michigan Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. The success of this application super-charged the creation of programs that give at-risk youth opportunities to heal at-risk landscapes and ecosystems, and gain self-respect and valuable life skills in the process.

The two programs they developed were After School Education and Youth Conservation Corps. After School Education, which currently operates in several elementary and middle schools in Northwest Michigan, offers academic and cultural enrichment opportunities as well as access to healthy role models, mentors, and community advisors. Tutoring and homework help are always available, along with activities that encourage good nutrition, spending time outside, and being physically active. A typical day might include music, learning about biology, visiting a local park, or getting a lesson in cooking from scratch.

The SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps, a sister program, is designed to empower 16-24 year olds through service learning projects and the development of green collar job skills. The Corps’ team-based approach is modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s New Deal. SEEDS Youth Corps teams work on labor-intensive conservation and stewardship projects, such as invasive species control, constructing boardwalks and trails, small scale farming, and many others. Teams are supervised by a SEEDS staffer who is trained to incorporate life skills and academics into the daily projects. The Youth Corps model is not solely grant-dependent but is also available for hire by outside organizations, which helps diversify program revenues as well as give the students real-life work experience.
Accomplishments

SEEDS staffers regularly see improvement in students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Every school site offers homework help and plenty of opportunities to practice core life skills, such as preparing nutritious foods, working effectively in groups, using creative expression to improve decision-making ability, and learning the value of physical activity and getting outdoors.

After School Education

1. In the 2013 school year, SEEDS After School program provided thousands of hours of quality learning opportunities, including:
   - 19,500 hours of Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM) programming
   - 18,000 hours of Service Learning, including Youth Conservation Corps
   - 13,500 hours of Arts & Culture activities
   - 19,000 hours of obesity-fighting physical activity (not including physically demanding Youth Corps time!)

2. Overall, compared to the state average, SEEDS After School students are more likely to be academically at-risk and report more:
   - Opportunities for governance/decision-making (44% : 38%)
   - Opportunities for engagement (60% : 57%)
   - Opportunities for interaction (53% : 50%)
   - Peer relationships (56% : 42%)

Youth Conservation Corps

1. In 2015, SEEDS employed 71 Youth Corps members and accomplished the following:
   - Restored two historic building structures, one in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and another in the Keweenaw National Historical Park
   - Constructed, restored, and maintained 3.5 miles of trails
   - Worked for local events, including the Traverse City Film Festival
   - Installed 900 feet of boardwalk
- Improved two miles of waterways on the Manistee River
- Built 38 in-stream fish habitat structures
- Planted 2,500 trees in Grand Traverse and Leelanau County
- Removed invasive plants from 200 acres of national and local parks

2. In 2015, Youth Corps members received the following credentials:
   - 46 were Certified in CPR/First Aid
   - 22 received Chipper and Chainsaw/Sawyer Certification
   - 11 became Certified Initial Lead Paint Renovators
   - 42 attended OSHA two-hour training
   - 14 attended Leadership Development Training

**Participation**

One of SEEDS core values is to invite partnerships. From the beginning of its youth-focused programming, SEEDS developed relationships with a variety of partners, including:

- David P Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality
- Each school building and district where a SEEDS program operates
- The Corps Network, a national association of corps located in Washington, DC
- Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore
- Local Conservancies, Conservation Districts and Parks & Rec Departments
- Traverse City Film Festival and other nonprofit organizations
- A network of ecologically-oriented educators, including the Great Lakes Bieneers Network
Early funders included:

- Michigan Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center program
- National Park Service
- Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians
- Herrington Fitch Family Foundation
- Local family courts

**Budget**

The cost to operate the After School Education is approximately $135,000 per year per school building. The cost to operate a Youth Conservation Corps Team of five is approximately $5,000 per week.

**Funding**

Initial funding was obtained through the Michigan Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants supporting After School Education. The initial grant funding, which helped support the launch of the Youth Conservation Corps, included several high school buildings. It lasted five years, but has now sunset. A new cohort of 21st Century Community Learning Center grants were awarded to SEEDS in 2013, this time supporting their learning curve for effectively engaging elementary school communities.

The Youth Corps is now funded by a much more diverse revenue portfolio, including public funding, a growing roster of private funders, and significant earned revenue from for-hire projects completed by the Youth Corps teams. In fact, Youth Corps revenues have been averaging 60 percent fee-for-service, and 40 percent government grants and philanthropy.