

12-10 - Equitable Onramps

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SPEAKERS

Aszya Summers, Ivel Gontan, Andrew Asaki, Will Kittel-Muhammad, Marta Burnet



Marta Burnet 00:02

Thank you. So we're going to record this so that folks who can't make it today can watch it. And now I'm going to turn it over to Ivel Gontan, who's our new Empathy Initiatives Director, and she is going to be facilitating our conversation today. Take it away, Ivel.



Ivel Gontan 00:16

Awesome. Thank you, Marta. Hi, everyone. As Marta said, my name is Ivel Gontan. I'm the Director of Empathy Initiatives at the Woodland Park Zoo. I've been in my role for a couple months now. I'm so excited to be here to moderate this discussion about onramps. This is a topic that is very near and dear to my heart as someone who has worked in informal science education and has focused on girls in STEM, and particularly Latina girls in STEM, so very important for me that we have representation in these spaces. I would like to start with our our land acknowledgement. Across the region of the network, ACE for Wildlife network members recognize that we are on the lands of tribal people. We acknowledge their stewardship of these places, we acknowledge that their stewardship of these places continues to this day, and that it is our responsibility to join them to restore the relationship with the living world around us. And they're on this map, you can see kind of all of the locations of the network, which I think is very impressive. The Alaskans. Thank you, Marta. Okay, so I will just kick off our conversation here, asking all of our illustrious panelists to introduce themselves and their programs. And we can just all call on you just go one by one for this question. So we'll start with Will.



Will Kittel-Muhammad 02:08

Hello, my name is Will Kittel-Muhammad, I use she/her/hers pronouns, and I am the Empathy Fellowship Coordinator at the Seattle Aquarium. I've been in my role for a little over two years now; I started in in October of 2019. And so to just give a brief overview of the Fellowship, the Fellowship was designed, a program that was designed and developed to be a pathway for people from over excluded communities or marginalized communities into the zoo, aquarium and conservation field. It is a full time fully benefited position that we offer this cohort. We

offer(ed) three, last cohort, we offer two and then we're looking to expand for this next upcoming cohort. And it's meant to be a development program for folks to identify a pipeline for themselves into the conservation fields, and to identify skills, both professional and personal. They seem to develop [these] for themselves over the course of the year as well as conducting a big part of their program is creating/implementing a project called Empathy Community Action Projects in which the fellows go into the communities that they come from, or that they want to serve that spot using empathy as a tool for conservation, and really engaging in community work. And we actually have a few fellows in the, in the audience shout out to Gabby and Whitney and Susanna. I don't know if you're here, but Hello, if you are. So they're here, and they're amazing as well. I'm excited to be here.

I Ivel Gontan 03:34

Thank you. I'm super excited to hear about more about this program. Asyza?

A Asyza Summers 03:45

Hi, my name is Asyza Summers, I'm the Curator of Animal Care and Conservation Education of the Racine Zoo. So I've been the head of the Education Department for just over five years here and then added on the Curator component about two years ago. And part of my role here is also the program director for the Racine AmeriCorps program. So we are at least last time I checked, it's been a couple years, so many other people have joined us, but one of only two AZA zoos that has an AmeriCorps program specifically hosted at our institution where we have had people that are the director of the program as a whole. And so that program has up to fifteen members serving each year. You'll hear me say a lot of weird things like serving and stipends. It doesn't necessarily mean how much they're getting or anything like that. It's just AmeriCorps really specific on their language and since this is recorded I have to be very careful on my language with that. But we have those members who served for a nine month term, doing a lot of free programming in the school district. And part of that is also a lot of working through resume work jobs, career building skills, getting certifications, and helping them with career placement. That's one component of the program. The other one is free programs at kindergarten, third, fourth, seventh and ninth grade at every public school in our county. So our real goal with this, you know, we're only in our third year right now. But our goal over 10, 15, 20 years is to pipeline students from our public schools, through these programs starting at a young age to where they can see themselves becoming members themselves, and then hopefully keeping them kind of in that conservation passion and showing them a path that can help them get themselves into a career field.

I Ivel Gontan 05:25

Thank you. Andrew?

A Andrew Asaki 05:27

Hi, I'm Andrew Asaki. I use he/him pronouns. I'm the Empathy Collaborative Manager at the Woodland Park Zoo. And the Empathy Collaborative is a project that is working in collaboration with several partners working through a co-design process. So we're working with Antioch

with several partners working through a co-design process. So we're working with Antioch University, Seattle, and Antioch University, New England, and we are working with three AmeriCorps VISTAs. So we in this project, are bringing AmeriCorps to the zoo for the very first time. So that has been a very big learning process. And this is my first time working with the VISTA program specifically. So the Empathy Collaborative is working with the South Seattle Community, specifically Rainier Beach and Beacon Hill neighborhoods to go through a co-design process, where we will be working over three years to co-create programs directly with the community. Kind of identifying those priorities, and matching them up with priorities of the zoo, making the programs that are culturally relevant, and both harnessing the opportunities that the zoo can help present and also the the knowledge and wisdom that is already in existence within those communities to really deepen our ties and our engagement, and relationships with the community really authentic and meaningful way. And at the end of these three years, we will not only have these great programs that have been developed, but also have an outline for exactly how we're going to continue doing this in the future. Well, there's also some of the work that I'm doing kind of separate from the the partnerships is making sure that work is happening internally so that we are codifying this process in a real way, and not just saying, "hey, that was a great three years" and then moving on, but really figuring out the ways that we are creating that kind of culture change and developing the structures to to make it really last. And have that be what we are doing not just for education programs, but across departments for all kinds of different opportunities for co-design.

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Ivel Gontan 07:59

Thank you, it's very exciting to see what a array of models we have in terms of like both the goals for the programs, and the kind of structure and even funding streams for these different programs. So I'm curious to dig into that more a little later. But first, I want to hear more about you all and what brought you to work at a zoo or an aquarium. And we can just popcorn it. So if you feel inspired to speak, just go ahead and

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Aszya Summers 08:33

I can take it, I'm not shy about going first. So for me the thing that inspired me was the Milwaukee Zoo. Actually, I don't know, do we have anyone from Milwaukee Zoo? If so I'm gonna be super happy. I love you guys. But Milwaukee county Zoo when I was a kid, oh, yeah, Sarah, awesome. The Milwaukee Zoo when I was a kid was free to county residents. And so growing up well under the poverty line, there wasn't a whole lot for my parents to do. So we went to the zoo a lot. And I kind of grew up going to the zoo with my parents and with my grandparents. And I still to this day, say that if that zoo hadn't had been free when I was a kid, I don't think I'd have gone to college, much less have the career that I have now. So, that was really inspiring for me. And those early days growing up in a zoo are why I was so motivated to figure out a path to get into college and figure out a way to do those internships to kind of build a career so I really am passionate about educational programming. And I'm really passionate about making it accessible to people of all backgrounds because I personally really know that the impact is huge. And making sure everyone feels represented in this field I think is critical.

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Andrew Asaki 09:39

I can jump in. So my parents are both now retired, but they were an aquatic biologist and a school teacher. So leading in informal science education in some ways felt a little bit different

school teacher. So landing in informal science education in some ways felt a little, I don't want to say predestined, but it is not, I think, a huge leap to see that connection there. And I initially like had gone to school to study marine biology was like, "hey, I can actually talk and a lot of these folks I am in classes with are not so good at that." Maybe that's something that I can really dig into. So after a few years in that major, I double majored in, in communication studies, I graduated and moved to New York to make my big name as the next Bill Nye slash Kratt brother. That industry is pretty tough in New York, and started working in informal science education first as a dinosaur troubadour at an animatronic Dinosaur Park, then as a mad scientist doing after school programs, eventually finding my way to the New York Aquarium, where I really, really connected to the the conservation specific aspects of it. I went through the AIP graduate program at WCS. And through my work, and classes, really found a passion for focusing on working with youth and working in environmental justice and other equity focused kind of streams within conservation and informal science ed. And I ended up moving out to Seattle because there was an opportunity to work with a tiny community based conservation organization focusing on youth programs, doing environmental justice programming. And I really loved it, but there was less of the conservation focus. That was something that I missed that I missed having, you know, co-workers that looked like this, and found out about this project and honestly was not looking to necessarily go back to work at an AZA institution. But this project was really exciting and really put all of the pieces of my kind of work passions together. So here I am, and I'm really excited to be here.

W

Will Kittel-Muhammad 12:25

Yes, I'll take the next gander. I also apologize, I have a very loud cat, so she might be meowing in the background. I apologize. She's always chooses the most inopportune times. Yeah, I know. So, my journey here into AZA actually began with the Seattle Aquarium. And it was this job that got me into the zoo and aquarium realm. My previous experience was mostly through public education and in local nonprofit work, in particular with politics. But I did over the course of my earlier in my career, I managed various internship and fellowship programs, at various nonprofits across Seattle. And so a lot of my experience lends itself to management, and mentoring. And a lot of my personal life experience was around community organizing, abolitionists, politic, all that sort of fun stuff. And so the two of them really, like kind of meld it together. And I really love mentoring young people, and particularly young people that don't have access to resources. The career field and the job fields, especially for these higher, higher up positions, or positions that have a lot of requirements. And then as I'm sure we are all familiar with, with AZA, I have to have a master's degree and, you know, 6 million hours of volunteering. And so when I first got exposed to this position, I was kind of just like, I need to get out of my current job, I'm going to be honest about that. I just really wanted to find something that could give me the freedom to mentor and to teach in a way that you know, wasn't restricted by, you know, the common core or any of those concepts in education. I really wanted to provide that mentorship, and also too, racism and other oppressions exist in every field. They're not just in politics, they're not just, they're not just an education, surprise, they're also in conservation as well. And I was really intrigued when I saw the position of how we can use this concept of empathy as a tool to combat real life, human oppression, real life isms that people deal with on an everyday basis. And so really just kind of combined my love for people with my love of mentoring, and here I am two years later. And so, my journey into AZA was through disposition, so a little bit less of a non traditional path, but nonetheless, still excited to be here.

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Ivel Gontan 15:01

What you're saying resonates so much with me. Personally, this is my first zoo gig, I spent most of my professional life working in informal science in science museums, and kind of never, ever expected that I would be at a zoo. And every time I tell someone, my job title, they're like, "what the hell", you know, like, it's just kind of like, unbelievable that I get to focus on this. And for me, also like this, that this sense of a lack of empathy overall, like, in our country, for people - for each other, was something that really, like, drove me to figure out mechanisms to promote it in whatever avenue I could. And so I think that combined with this sort of curiosity around what conservation looks like, for people of global majority, and how are how are these, how are there opportunities that can be leveraged to better the quality of life was also something I was like, okay, like, we need to be, to get great minds working on this. And so I think being able to promote more youth in this work has also been something that has been very, very exciting for me. Um, I'm curious, kind of along that that same vein, what do you all see as the future of zoos and aquariums in terms of their role in conservation?

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Andrew Asaki 16:42

Sure. So I think that the zoo world, especially the AZA zoos, and aquariums have such a critical role in the future of conservation. But I think that's also only true if we do a better job of adapting and engaging all communities, especially communities that we've not historically done a very good job working with. And yeah, I think that, you know, Aszya was talking about how, how early experiences at the zoo, were really formative, and that doesn't always turn into someone working in a career in, you know, conservation or even in science, but having just a population having a, you know, an electorate having everybody be not only like, aware of, but actually able to make decisions based off of, you know, being you know, media and science literate, and knowing the importance of conservation. And especially in this moment, the type of work that we need to be doing and the scale and the timeline in which it needs to be done, really requires there to be not just, you know, a portion of the population is dedicated to it, but all populations, all communities actually working together to to address these, like truly global issues.

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Will Kittel-Muhammad 18:37

For me, oh, go ahead, sorry. Go, go, go. No, oh, no, Zoom. Sorry. I think, for me, I kind of went a little bit more meta with this question. But I would really like to kind of see a shift in our current power structures within AZA, or just zoos and aquariums are conservation in general, to one that is more equitable and community driven. I, in my time here at the Seattle Aquarium, I think it's become really obvious to me that those that have always had the power to make decisions within the conservation spaces are very similar, and that it's very homogenous. I mean, let's just call the thing a thing. It's a lot of white people, white, rich, older white folks at the top of power hierarchies within our institutions, and just in conservation in general. And that isn't fair. And I've learned in my time here at the Aquarium that conservation is just as much for humans if not more for humans than it is for the natural world, and marine life and animal life. It is just just as much for us. And if you only have a small sect of the human population being the ones that are driving the solutions and conversations and resources for our solutions, that they're going to mostly benefit people that are like them. And you need to, and we need to have programs like the fellowship and other really cool, great and amazing programs like the ones mentioned here to get more diverse folks within these spaces to

provide pipelines and resources to get them into leadership positions. So I would really love to see more honest conversations like this become the norm. But to go even a step further, it's just beyond just the conversation is to have a tangible shift in policy, and particularly around hiring and retention within our institutions. And I would like to see us kind of set that example for the conservation field as a whole. If we can have these honest conversations now, then we should be able to honestly shift our hiring policies. There's no reason in 2021, that our institutions should still be mostly white-led, mostly white folks in management positions, no disabled folks, no visible queer, trans folks in positions of power. There needs to be because there are solutions that needs to be heard.

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Aszya Summers 18:39

No, go ahead. I agree so much with what both of you guys said on that. In my answer, you're gonna definitely hear that I have more of the science background than education or social sciences, even though I'm passionate about all of them. But for me, it's always about data, show me the data, show me the numbers, my staff want to change something I say, "where's the work? What can you back it up?" It's really interesting being in the AZA world for the last 10 years. When I came into it, it was, "it's really cool. You talk to kids, you hold an animal at the end, you tell them to turn the water off when they're done brushing your teeth, good job guys. Awesome." And evaluation wasn't even really something we thought about. And then watching first as evaluation became a big thing. And now we're able to look at where we're succeeding, and where we as a field are failing. And I think it's kind of out of that, that we're seeing now that we are absolutely failing at diversity, equity and inclusion in the AZA field, in my opinion. And being able to focus more on that and look at who are we reaching? Who are we reaching successfully? The majority of the people in this field are white. So are we able to reach people who are in underserved audiences? Are they listening to us? Are they understanding us? And I think a lot of what we're finding is no, that we really need to change our approach. And I feel like that is the future. Obviously, there's a million things I see as the future of zoos and aquariums. But I think that is absolutely huge. And then I know Paul pointed something out about a more regional focus in the chat. And I think that that's also really critically important and a direction that things are slightly slowly maneuvering towards, but something that I'm really passionate about in our programming. That is kind of the concept that needs there is not a destination that's unacceptable that you need to be able to have a lot of money or travel to find nature. But that nature, the environment, conservation is something that is in your backyard, learn about the birds, the bugs, the reptiles, the you know, some of you guys are in warmer places, that are in your backyard, and how to be able to conserve and help those. And make it accessible because when you're only talking about the crazy charismatic megafauna, but two thirds of your audience may not have the ability to see it, and there's huge barriers to being able to do that. As much as zoos can bring that home. I really wanted to just kind of echo and point out what Paul said in the chat, because I think that is also really critical when we think of our future and conservation.

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Ivel Gontan 23:27

Yeah, I think the, for me, when I was I think I was asked actually a question in my interview. And I think that zoos and aquariums have this really unique position around like, like my family saved up to be able to go to the zoo. And so you have this unique position to have like exposure points early on for all different kinds of folks that many other institutions don't have.

Like even science museums, which is like where I'm coming from, we didn't save up to go to the science museum. It wasn't it wasn't like a thing in my family. And so I think that there's just this like, very unique access point. And what zoos do with that in terms of like the relevancy piece in terms of like making connections is really critically important, I think, for their future. I, I wanted to dig in a little bit. And I do encourage you to use the chat, to ask questions so that this conversation is useful and fruitful for you all, as you're listening. And we can address things that you are more deeply interested in. I wanted to dig in a little bit and ask why. Why diversity matters? Will, you were talking about perspectives and what they bring to the table and hiring practices, and so I'm curious to hear from you all, why why does it matter to have a diverse workforce like what, what does that bring to the table? It's super loaded. So take it wherever you want to take it.

W

Will Kittel-Muhammad 25:10

You just gave me my favorite question in the world. Surprise, so I could talk for hours. So please let me know if you all need me to just like wrap it up. I think that one, a big part that I was remiss in mentioning is that not only do they need to be invited to the table, and not only have folks not been heard, it's also that they face the very real world consequences of not being a part of those conversations and not being able to have their voices heard and taken seriously and have policy created through that. We, I'm sure we are all very aware of the consequences of global warming of the consequences of like deforestation, the consequences of everything, or perhaps the biggest consequences are happening to those that are least responsible for them being caused. The everyday worker is not the one that is causing massive oil spills, yet, they're the ones that have to deal with the like jet fuel in their water. And so, to have those spaces, to have those concerns, not only be heard, but be taken seriously and to and to have varying again, varying perspectives. And not just for like opinions for opinion sake, but truly because these opinions save lives. Conservation is a global issue. You can't just have white people leading the discussion. [Inaudible] That's really ultimately what it boils down to you can't have - the world is not a cisgendered, heterosexual, white world in its totality. Therefore, why are the people making the decisions that are impacting the totality, why is it only just them? Is it because they're the most skilled? I don't think so. That's not to say that they aren't skilled and that they aren't, that their voices aren't also necessary, but they should not be the only sole voice dictating decision and dictating policy. And so ultimately, what it boils down to so having a diverse workplace, enriches the workplace. But also only if it's done successfully and done responsibly, and done with care. It's one thing to just have diverse staff, but what are you doing to retain those staff? What are you doing to make sure that they feel actively supported? What are you doing to make sure that they that the rest of your staff that aren't from those marginalized or over excluded communities, what are they doing to make sure that they are making sure that the workplace is equitable and safe for their colleagues? who's directing them? And so diversity in of itself is great. What's even better is making that like conscious, responsible decision making and shifts in policy, because I think we're also starting to learn that diversity for diversity's sake is not enough, you should truly want to embrace that diversity because it is fundamental to our operations. That's my little piece.

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Ivel Gontan 28:05

Yes, I love it. And I think it resonates so much with me. When I was working on STEM programs for girls like working really hard to have girls represented in these spaces. And then I spent so much time fretting around, like, what happens to them when they get there, like, how are they

- if they're not supported, they like leak out of the pipeline. And, and it happened to me too, like I [have] a blue collar background and family. And when I got my first professional job, I was like, "I don't know how to act or be" or, you know, got called out for being too loud. And so it's like, all these experiences. And I think that's one of the things that diversity brings, is this, like, I know what it feels like I can you know, and so this very firsthand understanding. We had a really great question in the chat that says "outside of specific fellowships, internships, etc., how have you worked with your institutions to make the hiring process more accessible? And inviting diverse applicants? Or what are the, what are your goals for that in the future?" So how have you been able to influence this, if at all, at your own institutions, the hiring process.

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Aszya Summers 29:19

I'm going to kind of answer that, and then also the more diverse workforce all at once because for me, and my experiences are kind of all intertwined. And it's something you hear all over the place is that you want to hire diverse and you look at the applicant pool and the diversity isn't there. There are ways to increase that. You know, I've reached out to local advocacy groups and like [been like], "hey, can we advertise these positions internally with your audiences that you already have that you can reach?" There are ways to broaden your applicant pool. But while that is one aspect here and now, it is so critical that we have and support those diverse workforces that we have, and that we retain those people because those are models, that the students that we're reaching, the audience's that we're reaching, are going to see. If people don't see themselves succeeding in the field, they're not going to feel like they can go into the field. And there's a lot of data [that] supports that, that shows that people need to see someone that looks like them. And just from a personal note, something that I never really thought much about, is I do identify as queer. And I never really mentioned it in the workplace, because I didn't want that to become a big part. And I finally was like, whatever I started just not shoving it in people's faces, but dropping in like, "oh, yeah, I'm dating a girl right now", wearing a rainbow bracelet. Suddenly, I started retaining more of the queer interns and staff. And suddenly our staff started shifting a little bit more. And I was like, "hey, okay, clearly, this matters." And obviously, you want to avoid tokenism. You don't want to put someone up on a pedestal, like, "look, look, we got one!" That's stupid. But at the same time, it showed me for sure that having those people that show yes, you can succeed with whatever background you are, in this field is so important. And we need to have more people of color. And we need to have more people from every different background. Because when a student sees someone like them succeeding, and in a job, it's easier for them to see themselves in that role, and motivate themselves actually go ahead and do that. So for me, making sure that we are in our public schools, that we were doing these things for free, that we are keeping who can access our programs based on what schools and what students can afford it, is how we get more of those people to see themselves in those roles, and then move forward and get the careers starting when they're kids. For a lot of people, they already have a different career. And maybe had they had that reach when they're younger they'd be in the field, but they're not right now. So how do we get today's kids to feel like they are empowered to take that path?

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Andrew Asaki 31:56

Will, I know that you have lots of thoughts. We've had conversations about these thoughts, or I've listened to your presentation. So I'll be very quick. And I'll just kind of from this perspective of this, this project, you know, we have a really great opportunity and built into our model is, is

literally just listening to what the community is telling us and just how important the idea of representation both in the sense of seeing yourself, you know, at the zoo, on the website, but also like, you know, having people who have shared experiences you know, that's such a crucial piece of of a positive experience. Not just getting people through the turnstile, but once they're there, what is their experience, and how can you, you know, continue to to really make a meaningful experience that people want to come not only come back to you but want to be a part of. So one of the things that we've learned is just how important it is to be building trust, as an institution within communities where there hasn't historically been that trust and there isn't, you know, already, like, you know, kind of like those easy connections, because you already have the buy in. And another piece of that, and the organization that I previously worked for, between where I am now and when I was at the New York Aquarium was really focused on working with majority AAPI youth and a lot of their the parents of those youth were first generation immigrants. So there's a lot of pressure on the and they're all high schoolers, a lot of pressure to see them go off into very specific fields. You know, medicine, engineering, things like that. And we were working with them not necessarily to try and derail that, but to like really engage them in these programs that they would find interesting and fun. And, you know, also hopefully encourage them to follow the passions that they have. Even when that wasn't necessarily something that was within a you know, within kind of their family's narrative of what you do as the the child of immigrants who have taken, made these really big sacrifices. And with that there's this huge responsibility for us as the the conservation world to actually have something there; have a pathway and have opportunities that aren't just like, you know, you know, what Will was mentioning earlier, all these degrees and hours and hours of volunteer time but you know, making these opportunities really a possibility for people of, you know, historically excluded communities. Some of the things that we've done, you know, all the positions that we have, whether it's through AmeriCorps, through our Graduate Partnership, these are all paid positions. We were really fortunate to have gotten the funding to be able to do that. But we've also, you know, some of the things as far as like hiring onto my team, I've very much the focus on writing job descriptions that are accurate to the work that is happening. And not just like, "oh, we want you to have a graduate degree, because I have a graduate degree and because I know that it's just such a great thing". Does your job require a graduate degree or an undergraduate degree or whatever? A lot of times [it] doesn't, and there's a lot of this great experience that people can bring that aren't, you know, through academia. And also, having opportunities, having these positions where you are writing in the description, like, these are the things that we are saying, we need to have more of, well go ahead and look for that in in your, in your positions, if you're saying you are wanting to have you know, greater diversity in language, or you know, all these, like different experiences that are going to improve the field, then you should be also hiring for that and not just for your, you know, I don't know your diversity consultant that you bring in for a few months. And, yes, agree with the listing the pay rate, you know, think that's, that's really huge. Thank you, Will. And the last thing I'll say, is building those relationships so that you can actually have, you know, we talk about a career ladder or career lattice, or whatever, but like actually building opportunities for people to, to build on their experiences. Both of the people who I've hired who are, I will say, worth, far and away that the best people that we could have asked for, and we're certainly interviewing one of those whom is on the call. Hi, Emily how's it going? Were working with the project or with the zoo prior. And we were able to see exactly how their experiences were, would make them perfect for this position. But we also were able to talk to them directly, or have some line of communication about the position so that they could see it, and so that they would, you know, have an interest in going after the position. And we're so much better for having them on the team. And there's so many people that, you know, we've all we've all either, you know, had job openings, or maybe been the person who could have benefited from that type of direct connection in, you know, working with actually making this career lattice

pipeline, whatever, whatever metaphor you want to use. I think that is happening, and not just being like, "ah, yes, this person is way overqualified for this job. So I'm going to see them as like the best candidate."

I Ivel Gontan 38:36

Thank you, Andrew. There's some like really great, great nuggets there. And it's interesting, because I feel like a lot of what you're saying just sort of applies all across the board, not just to youth. So there's a few really great questions in the chat. But I was curious if anyone had any thoughts around, like, particularly youth from people of global majority, like how, what are some specific strategies that your programs use to enable these pathways to conservation, be really clear and enticing and increase that sense of belonging for youth of these communities?

A Aszya Summers 39:24

Just a real brief one for us outside of the AmeriCorps program, we have a high school internship program that happens and doesn't as funding ebbs and flows. But it's been going on and off for about four years, where we keep in mind that for high schoolers to do some kind of internship or something after school, we're also competing with jobs after school. So we have an after school high school intern program for eight weeks that has classes and weekend interpretation shifts, and we actually pay them even though at the class they are not really doing volunteering or service or anything in class, but we pay them out a stipend for attending that one night a week and those two hours every weekend, because we want it to be accessible. And we want there to be kind of a motive to do it instead of working at, you know, Burger King or something like that we want them to be able to do that and make, maybe not as much, but it's very few hours, something to make more worth their while and kind of entice those individuals who participate.

W Will Kittel-Muhammad 40:19

I feel like the term young people is relative. And in my reality, it's my age and lower, considered young people. I'm still a young people I like to think, as are many of us on this call. And so something that I that I really do intentionally in the management of the fellowship program is to just kind of shift and off shift or offer a different way of doing work. While I technically am their supervisor, and they are technically like my supervisees, I make an active and conscious effort to set the tone that the work is really collaborative and driven by their goals and their desires and what they want to get out of this program. Because people are happier to do work that they're passionate about. Whoa, what a concept. People enjoy doing things that are interesting to them. And I my myself and by extension, the fellowship, I'm here to provide resources and mentorship and I'm not here to dictate, micromanage, or stifle opportunity or stifle their creativity, that's not my role to be a gatekeeper. I think that offering freedom within the work and the resources to provide that I would be remiss to mention that like, yes, I am grant funded. And so I have the resources to provide that. And that may not always be replicable for folks. But what is replicable is shifting your management practices. I find that a lot of managers in the US are driven by ego and we are a culture that is obsessed with punishment. And so are you looking to hire the best person for the position? Or are you looking for someone that suffered the same way that you did, and you want a mini? Is that

what you're truly looking for when you're hiring? And so I think a lot I would encourage folks on this call or folks in management positions elsewhere, it's like, do these things have the way that things have been operated and ran? Do they always have to be this way because they've been this way or what can be shifted? What can I do personally to change that? What can I do that's making my staff more comfortable and safe around me? Because as someone said, they produce higher quality of work, when they feel safer around you and they view you as a person, and not someone that is there to punish them, or they're to hold the job over their head that at any moment, they feel as if they can be fired. That is very irresponsible management. And that is driven by your own desire for punishment, and you should go to therapy for that. Like, but don't take it out on your staff. Like that's not, that's not your staff's problem. That's your problem. And I think that is shifting culturally, but I think for a long time, our culture has been obsessed with that, that that's what makes a good manager, someone who's stern, someone who is there to, you know, make all the decisions. And I'm like, "huh, like, yeah, I mean, I will provide guidance, but I'll provide guidance and support when necessary, but you are, you are grown adults. Or a young person like you, you have autonomy over your state, over your space and time here. And I'm here to provide that for you." And I think that that really shifts a lot of people's relationship to the work and makes them excited and happy to come to work and not anxious and fearful. Surprise, and people are happier to do when it's not the later.

I Ivel Gontan 43:44

I love that so much. And I feel like there's always this kind of tension, because we operate within the systems that are entrenched in, you know, white supremacy, patriarchy, capital[ism], there's so many systems. And one of the ways that I've struggled with it in my own, my own work is like, how am I going to thrive in a system that I'm actively trying to overthrow? And I feel like you were all speaking to culture and some of these other pieces around that. And, and we had a question in the chat of avoiding tokenism and making sure minorities are more visible for other members of minorities to see. And I think that the part of the answer to that is having focus on leadership. I feel like when I'm making decisions around who to put on a flyer or who to put on a website, like I want to see people who look like me. And so, you know, I think that having more representation will lead to more representation. So and then there was this question around the shifting work culture to be more inviting, safe and equitable? Do any of our other panelists have ideas on that shifting culture piece, which is one of the most important and one of the most elusive because they're so entrenched.

A Andrew Asaki 45:06

So I think, as far as like the shifting the culture piece, I think that's like the big question. And that's really hard. I think one of the things that has been really helpful for me as the manager has been, pathways of feedback that are safe and anonymous. You know, we're really fortunate to have evaluation on our team. But it doesn't have to strictly come from this. But, you know, having an opportunity for, this is with our AmeriCorps VISTA specifically, for them to talk through their, [we've] been doing a journey mapping process, and for them to talk through their experience and, you know, some of the the pain points that they have experienced, and the ways that we as a team and I, as their supervisor have, have failed them, frankly. Even though we have weekly check ins we're asking them, like, you know, what feedback do you have for me? Like, how much, especially in their position, how much are they really feeling you know, safe to communicate, even though we do have a good relationship? So, you know, not

depending on just like, "oh, well, we, you know, we're tight." So, you know, they'll let me know if there's an issue. But intentionally building in those opportunities for feedback. And for, like, being very direct of like, this is what's not happening, and what we want to see and need to see for it to actually be different. And, you know, that is a very, like, small example. But I think that, you know, having that type of, you know, something that is not only anonymous direct, but also has some level of like, there's a certain amount of accountability being held with that, even if it's just like, because it's fairly public, at least within in the team, you know, it's not just something there's like, well, I have this feedback, so I can now ignore it. But like, the, there is some impetus to actually act on it, how that gets implemented on a larger scale. I'm not sure. But you know, that's just been something that has really, like, you know, it was, is a really good learning experience for myself.

A

Aszya Summers 47:52

And I feel like there's a lot of things you can do, because people are asking you as a supervisor, and it's not a supervisor thing, you know, as a supervisor, kind of echoing some of what Will said on both of these things. But like, I have employees, one of them has four kids. And she's told me a couple times she's like, "any other boss would have fired me by now, I'm a mess. I've never had like-". You communicate every time what's going on. You have four kids, you're going to have health issues, we're going to have to shuffle. It's fine. I have a migraine, we have to shuffle. Why is that any different? We can hear it out, right? There's those kinds of things. But then also, having those conversations when things pop up is something that you don't have to be in a leadership role to do. And I have an amazingly supportive director, who is significantly older than me and grew up in a significantly less diverse community than I did. And I'm very lucky that our director is very open to listening and things like that. So sometimes I have to be like, "hey, I don't think that the way we approach this was necessarily the best. And here's why." And it's always a comfortable conversation. But having those conversations. Or I had a situation where our AmeriCorps members actually were looking at evaluations from a chair and the teacher said, don't assume fourth graders can read. And they brought it to me and were kind of like, "haha, can you believe the teacher said this?" And I was like, "alright, guys, let's sit down and have a conversation about illiteracy as a form of oppression. And how, you know, some of this stuff is rooted in historical precedent and things you guys maybe never even thought about. But I don't like that we're making fun of this. And clearly, it's, it's not because you're doing something wrong, I'm gonna be mad at you. You're lacking context here. So let's just have a discussion." And sometimes you might hear something and realize that that's not right, I don't know how to talk about it. So find someone else who might help you find the words to talk about it. We had a teacher come in who was African American who was talking to one of my staff, and the staff came to me like, "oh, she's yelling at me. I don't know what's wrong." So I went to talk to the teacher. She's like, "I'm not yelling at her. I'm just loud. I'm black. That's how I am." And I was like, "okay, that's fine. You seem cool. Everything seems great over here. How the heck do I talk to the staff person about what just happened, I have no idea." But I went to someone else that was able to help me find the words and communicate that. And it would be so easy to just say like, "okay, resolve the situation moving on." But I really wanted to have that conversation with that person to avoid something like that happening again. And it's not comfortable. And it's not easy. And it wasn't something that I was familiar with with my background. But being willing to be uncomfortable and have those conversations is hard. And I'm lucky that I'm in a supervisory position where I have significant comfort in my job, I'm not worried about getting fired for saying the wrong thing. But even if you feel like you don't find other allies, if there's a lot of you that are saying the same thing, sometimes that can really help to if you don't feel safe to bring it up, because I know not every

institution is lucky enough to have the culture that you know us on the panel have in our institutions to be able to speak out. And I think that's important to identify as well. We're talking about shifting cultures, I think all of us are at institutions that are maybe further down the line than others.

I Ivel Gontan 51:00

Thank you so much. It's been really refreshing to hear like new ideas that I hadn't thought of, and different levels. One of my favorite tools for disarming oppression, is asking questions. You know, why do we do this this way? Oh, because we always [did], that's a great reason. No, can we can we dig a little bit deeper? Can we figure out, you get more at the core of like, how we can change things. And so it's been surprising to me how effective that has been with leaders who are just, you know, status quo, and then you sort of like, "I'm just wondering why", that has been really effective. This has been such an amazing and heavy, heavy conversation. And I'm so grateful for folks who really get into the weeds of it, I wanted to end on a positive note. So I want to ask each of the panelists to share their favorite story or a favorite moment from their program.

A Andrew Asaki 51:59

I will jump in if if you all want a second to think. Also side note, Will, I too consider myself a young person and I will never give that up. So we were doing an event out in the community. We were tabling for the project, getting people interested in signing up for listening sessions, and had you know, activity packets and like, you know, fun fun things for people to come around for. There's the The Back to School Bash, hosted by one of our our community partners. And they also had a PA and a bunch of performers. And kind of organically, one of our VISTA's kind of went up to them and had a conversation and then she was like, "hey, can I have a few minutes?" We're like, "yeah, sure what's happening?" She's like, "I'm actually going to go up and perform one of my songs. Because, like, that's who I am. And this is my community. And this is like, like a part of it." So you know, this is just like amazing moment where she's up there. She's like, you know, a few years out of high school rapping about like her experiences, that all of these folks that this event was for, like are actively going through and just like something that I would never feel comfortable with, like going up and inserting myself or being in, in that type of situation. And it was just this super amazing moment. And we all had to like kind of forget the table for a few minutes so that we could just cheer her on and take pictures and everything like that. Can I say that I consider myself a young person and call a 20 something, you know, having a proud papa moment towards in the same sentence? I don't know. But it was really amazing. And it was really great.

W Will Kittel-Muhammad 54:10

Yes, you can to answer your question. You absolutely can. And I would say for me my favorite program, I mean, there's a lot of favorite moments, but the one that immediately came to mind was the last day of our first cohort of fellows. I mean, I love my second cohort of fellows, y'all will also be my favorite memory on your last day. But they're the first cohort of fellows. When we just kind of had our last day together and we had a meal. We just went up to Pike Place Market and had a meal together. And we were just reflecting on the year and just we sat at a

table for like three hours and just talked and just really reflected on how much we appreciated one another and how much we had each individually grown and survived and living in a pandemic still, at that time and at present, and still just kind of thinking what our next steps would be. And for the two of them. It was really identifying like, where they wanted to apply now that they finished their first year, and I'm happy to say they both got jobs after the fellowship. Woop woop! And it was just really, just a really good time to reflect. And I find something really intimate and amazing about just sharing food with people, and sharing a meal with folks and just really, really, really reflecting and intentional reflecting. And that just really kind of warms my heart and you know, reminded me that, you know, I may not always had the best time in my job, and there are parts that definitely I struggle with. And that frustrate me. And, you know, I do burn me out if I'm being honest. But reminding myself that it's those kinds of moments that reinvigorate me and re-energize me to do this work because they're so amazing. They being the fellows, they're just so amazing. They're going to go doing great, amazing things. And if I guess to get to be a small part of that journey, like that makes a lot of this stress worth it and a lot of the work worth it, just to be a small part of their path. So it makes me that makes me always excited. And happy.

I Ivel Gontan 56:06

I love it. Aszya, we're at time, but I want to hear your story. So wanna hear it in two sentences.

A Aszya Summers 56:13

On our eval, it said, "why do we protect birds", they said, "because you never know what the bird is going through". And I loved it.

I Ivel Gontan 56:23

Thank you. Thank you, panelists for such an amazing, inspiring conversation. It was so great to be sharing time with you all. And thank you all for coming to our chat and I hope to continue this great work together.

A Aszya Summers 56:40

Bye, y'all.

A Andrew Asaki 56:42

Thanks, everybody.

W Will Kittel-Muhammad 56:45

Thanks, everyone.



Marta Burnet 56:46

Thank you.