



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH EMPATHY

First Year of Capacity Building Grant Program

Evaluation Report

Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ) strives to foster empathy and caring behavior towards animals. To continue in this goal, the *Advancing Conservation through Empathy Capacity Building Grant Program* (grants program) was formally announced at the Creating Change Symposium held in Seattle, in February 2020. AZA accredited zoos and aquariums located in the seven state region of Alaska, Washington, Idaho, Montana, N. Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin were invited to apply to support their work that improves their ability to foster empathy for wildlife. The 2020 grant program's two objectives are:

1. AZA accredited zoos and aquariums develop the capacity needed to increase the impact of empathy practices and programs on their intended audiences.
2. Woodland Park Zoo applies what they learn from the first year of the granting program to design future capacity-building opportunities that expand the ability of our partner zoos and aquariums to deliver effective empathy programming.

Woodland Park Zoo defines **capacity-building** as how an organization develops, utilizes and strengthens existing resources to most effectively achieve its empathy-based goals. In the grant application we recommended the following five domains for capacity-building.

5 domains of capacity-building



Staffing



Knowledge or
expertise



Partnerships



Facilities



Supplies

Of the 20 eligible organizations in the region, 50% submitted an application to the grant program, with one organization submitting two project proposals for funding.

In the 2020 pilot year of the empathy capacity-building grant program we...

Awarded a total of
\$70,062 to **seven**
zoos and aquaria,

funding
eight capacity-
building projects

Across **four states.**



Learning and Evaluation Questions

Woodland Park Zoo's Empathy Project team leads the new grants program. As this was the program's first year, the team was most interested to understand if the design and processes put in place are supportive of successful grant implementation and in what ways the grant projects are contributing to organizations' capacity to foster empathy. The Empathy Project team prioritized the following four learning and evaluation questions.

- To what extent are grant activities implemented as planned and what challenges do grantees experience in achieving their intended goals?
- How is the grant program affecting capacity to develop or deliver empathy-based programming and what tangible and intangible contribution does the grant program make to the ACE Network?
- How is Woodland Park Zoo's role and management perceived by grantees and ACE Network partners?

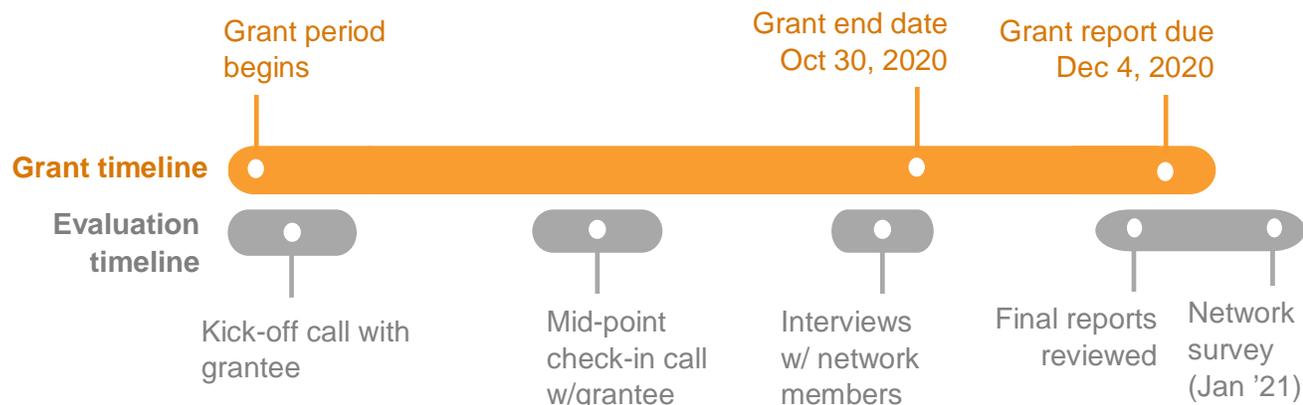
The team developed and implemented an evaluation plan to answer these questions and provide meaningful opportunities to reflect on our new role in overseeing the grant program.

Methods: The Empathy Project team used mixed methods to gather relevant information from our grantees and/or network members, prioritizing data collection strategies that could be easily embedded into the grant program process and be responsive to the unique challenges many organizations faced during the pandemic. [See evaluation activity timeline on next page] The primary data sources used to answer our priority questions are:

- Grant kick-off and mid-point discussions with each grantee.
- Final grant report from grantees in either a written report or through a Zoom discussion. Half the grantees (4 grant projects) chose to provide a written report and the other half (4 grant projects) opted for the online discussion. Final reports and discussion transcriptions were coded and analyzed.
- Formative interviews conducted with 17 network organizations (85% participation of network member organizations), by a third-party consultancy. Results were anonymized and then summarized in a final report for Woodland Park Zoo.
- At the end of the grant period, the Empathy Project team sent a survey to the ACE for Wildlife contact list, containing 75 network members. The survey received 21 responses for a response rate of 28%.¹ Just over half the respondents (n=11) are from organizations that received a grant.

¹ Surveys were sent to the ACE for Wildlife network contact list. Questions were asked on a 5 point scale and respondents could opt to select "N/A" if they didn't have a response to a questions.

Timeline of Evaluation activities during the 2020 grant period



EVALUATION RESULTS OF 2020 GRANT PROGRAM

GRANT IMPLEMENTATION, CHALLENGES, AND INNOVATIONS

To what extent are grant activities implemented as planned and what challenges do grantees experience in achieving their goals?

WPZ launched the grant program in the middle of the COVID pandemic, presenting the grantees with a number of potential challenges to completing grant work as intended. All grant projects made noted changes to their project's planned activities, but **challenges related to COVID-19 contributed to the majority of changes made to grant activities.** Due to COVID, grantees were faced with site closures, school closures, reduced class sizes, staffing reductions, partners' competing priorities, changes to operating protocols, and the sudden need to transition to virtual learning formats.

Faced with these challenges, grantees quickly innovated and adapted their activities to respond to changing conditions, while still maintaining their original project goals. Three grantees that originally intended to deliver programming to students in the classroom, pivoted to synchronous, virtual formats.

"Due to the ongoing global pandemic and uncertainty around whether classes would be taking place in person or virtually this year, the programs were translated to a digital format. As a result, we have developed both an in-classroom lesson and evaluation as well as a digital adaptation and evaluation." - grantee

In addition to the COVID-19 related challenges, typical staff turnover, a lack of existing resources, and miscalculations in the time required to complete planned activities, also contributed to modifications in grant activities. For example, one grantee *"found a lack of assessment tools*

designed to measure empathy in children ages 3-5. Thus, instead of purchasing assessment tools, [the grantee project team] created them”, requiring more time than originally planned.

These changes were reflected in both the grant activities and the grant budgets. The main variances from proposal budgets to the final reports included: moving from consultant to personnel when new staff hired, moving from travel to personnel and materials/supplies when travel had to be cancelled due to COVID-19, and moving from consultant to personnel when consultant invoice was lower than planned.

Challenges with evaluation activities: The grantees’ planned evaluation activities were frequently adapted or, in the case of three grant projects, left incomplete at the end of the grant period. The pandemic posed added obstacles in reaching target audiences and assessing planned activities. Evaluating virtual programming is a new experience for most informal learning institutions and the transition to virtual classes required four grantees to adapt their evaluation plans for online data collection. Unforeseen obstacles, like the need to modify classroom observation to be done virtually over Zoom, or navigating ethical and legal guidelines laid out by school district recording policies and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, limited the data that could be collected directly from the students.

“Due to school regulations, this year we were unable to record classes or invite additional evaluators into the classroom. . . . [W]e were unable to get individual data points on specific children over the course of all three lessons.” – grantee conducting synchronous online programming in schools

Results from third-party formative interviews and a network member survey both showed that grant applicants perceived the application process to be well communicated and relatively straightforward to complete. [See survey results in Chart 1 and Chart 2.] One interviewee said about the application process, “[The Empathy Project team] were actually very accommodating with not forcing it to fit in a perfect little box. . . . [T]his one was very open so it seemed very flexible and not difficult to apply.” Some grant applicants reported they would have liked more time to complete the application process. The formative interviews and survey results did indicate that the empathy grant’s goals and its connection to network priorities could be made clearer.

Chart 1. Survey respondents report the grant program was well communicated overall.
 Future grant programs could benefit from clarifying the purpose and goals more clearly.

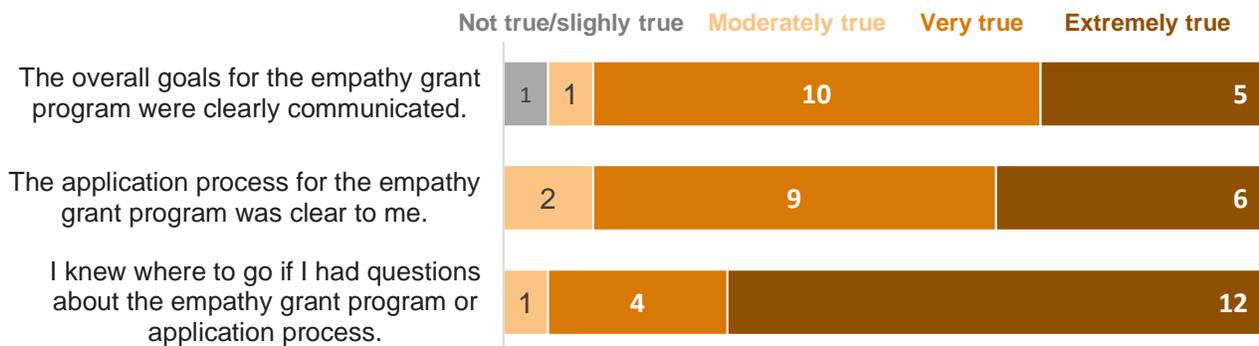
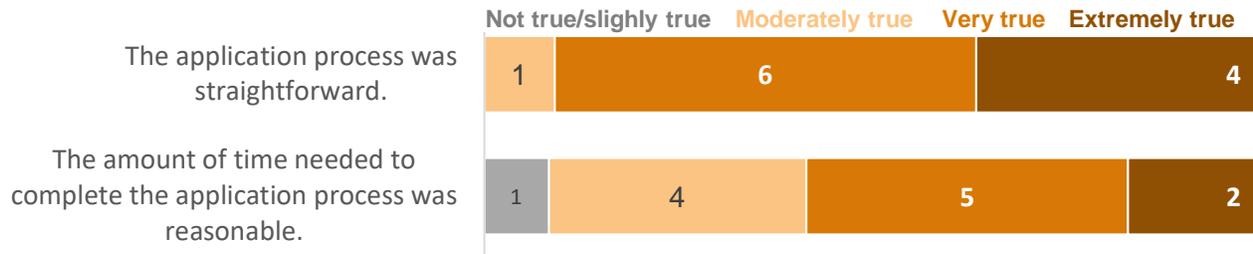


Chart 2. Survey respondents found the grant application to be straightforward.
Some grant applicants indicated that they could have used more time for the application process.



GRANT PROGRAM’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CAPACITY-BUILDING

How is the grant program affecting capacity to develop or deliver empathy-based programming? What tangible and intangible contribution does the grant program make to the ACE Network?

Analysis of the final grant reports showed that all grant projects contributed to capacity-building to foster empathy for animals in some way, many with gains across multiple capacity-building domains. On the survey, 10 out of 11 responding grant recipients self-reported that the grant program had a *significantly positive impact* or *extremely positive impact* on their organization’s ability to foster empathy for animals. Most often grantees demonstrated advances in expertise to promote empathy-based experiences, followed by expanding resources or supplies, and growth in partnerships.



Building experience and expertise: All grantees demonstrated capacity building in their expertise or experience to promote empathy-based practices and experiences.

- For two grantees this involved improving their ability to effectively train staff and volunteers in empathy practices by creating new training programs, with the intent to build expertise across the organization. *“We are ready and excited to have our custom empathy training videos, allowing our entire zoo crew to jump on board the empathy train.”*
- The four grantees that transitioned to online learning environments gained new experience adapting empathy practices to a new platform and learning environment.
- Five grantees reported gained experience in evaluating their empathy efforts. For example, four grantees initiated new evaluation strategies to assess their programs, including modifications to virtual environments and developing new assessment instruments. Another grantee completed a formative evaluation project, gathering diverse stakeholder perspectives to identify the key factors to successful school partnerships in delivering empathy-based curricula, setting them up for future program expansion.



Building resources and supplies: Over the grant period, all the grantees grew their resources to advance and sustain their capacity-building goals. This mostly included tangible tools, such as training materials, curricula, or assessment instruments. [See Table 1 for list of resources produced].

- Results from the third-party interviews indicated the importance of having available resources for network members, especially those that can be used at smaller

organizations. The first year of the grants program indicates that these funded projects will likely provide valuable resources to the network and its members.

- Resources were shared with the network members during a 3 part webinar series, highlighting grant recipients and their projects. They have since been added to a central location, the ACE for Wildlife member website. When grantees were asked in their report-outs how they intend to continue or sustain their empathy goals after the grant period, six grantees specifically cited their new resources or tools as a means for sustainability. For example one grantee stated in their final report that, *“Additionally, with the partnerships and deliverables funded by this grant, continuation of this program is now not only possible, but exceedingly likely, in future years.”*
- A number of grantees have also found added applications for their resources, beyond the original, intended use. For example, the empathy-based field trip guides are also being included on the organization’s website as public resource, and the animal biography sign content is now repurposed as part of the branded packaging for their adopt-an-animal program.

Table 1. Tangible products from capacity-building grant projects

Category	Details
Training materials	A training module for docent volunteers, designed to bridge the gap between staff expertise and the delivery of empathy-based content to elementary students. New training videos that aim to teach staff and volunteers effective empathy practices.
Adapted or new curricula	Revised classroom curricula, informed by empathy-based practices, and adapted for both an in-person and virtual class environment. New empathy-based field trip guides for elementary school teachers and students.
Literature reviews	Completed literature reviews on dimensions of empathy, relationships to social emotional learning and prosocial behavior, empathy and child development, the relationship between empathy and conservation, and assessing empathy in children.
Communication tools	Animal biography signs sharing individual animal’s information with zoo guests Qualifying rubric outlining necessary factors for a school to become a successful partner to apply an empathy-based curriculum.
Evaluation and Assessment	Created 3 assessment tools to monitor empathy and social emotional behavior in children aged 3-5. Revised data collection protocols for online or virtual school settings.



Building partnerships: The grant program supported grantees' internal and external partnership building that expands their capacity to foster empathy.

- One grantee formed a number of valuable partnerships to advance their empathy-building efforts. As they state, *"This project has fostered an invaluable partnership between [university researcher] and the [grantee organization]. This partnership opens the door to future research, learning opportunities for college students, and improved practices at the zoo preschool."*² This organization also formed a new advisory committee, bridging their education staff with external partners that have aligned goals.
- Another grantee formed stronger bonds with their internal animal care department, inviting them to contribute their knowledge of the individual animals in their care to the grant project.
- Lastly, one grantee conducted formative research with their key stakeholders in the education system, to identify the meaningful criteria for their program. This activity strengthened these existing relationships and resulted in a process and tool for successful expansion of the program with future partners

Additional benefits of grant program: These projects also garnered a number of intangible and unplanned benefits for the grantees.



Advancing internal buy-in and discussion within organizations: Previous experience has highlighted the importance of getting broad internal support and staff buy-in for promoting empathy-based experiences with zoo or aquarium audiences. In the final grant reports, many grantees expressed that implementation of their grant projects contributed to new or growing discussions within their organization. For some it was just seeing the empathy work in action on zoo grounds that added contextual understanding. One grantee reported *"This tone of empathy is overflowing to other departments of the zoo, as well. A zoo employee from the education department said, "When I watch you with the kids, I see someone with...patience and grace...and it sets the tone for the whole preschool program - it makes me want to be there - it makes me want to learn how you do it."*



Facilitating future opportunities for expansion or funding: Three grantees indicated that their grant project has opened up new avenues for funding. For example, one grantee, who is planning to seek additional funding for zoo programs in schools, is planning to adapt their empathy-based programming framework to additional grade levels. Another grantee said that *"I'm really excited about the implications for using what we've developed here to help funders understand what the program is. . . [I] think that the value of this information will be really helpful for the funding side."*

² Name of researcher and organization are redacted to maintain anonymity.



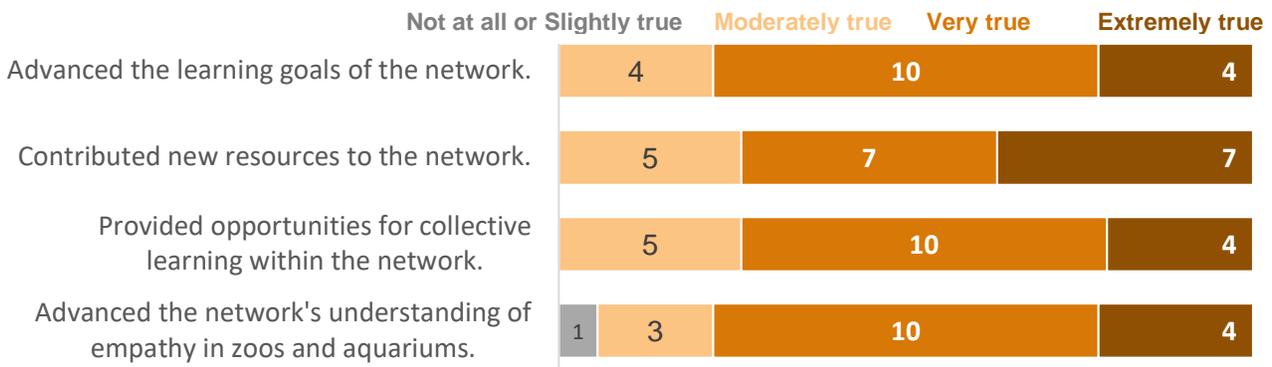
Maintained empathy-based programming as priority during changing times: In the final grant reports, two grantees suggested that if it were not for the capacity-building grant project, their organization’s empathy work might have been discontinued, a casualty of the pandemic. As one grantee put it *“I think there was a real risk of [our empathy program] to kind of fizzle away. . . because of the survival mode and COVID. I feel like the opportunity to apply for and get some funding to do this, forced us and encouraged us to do this work this year.”* And another stated *“The grant money we received was the motivation we needed to make our project a priority. Because of this, we were able to accomplish more than we set out to with the project.”*

Connecting the ACE for Wildlife network to the grant project learning: The primary opportunity for network members to hear about the grant projects and resulting resources or learning was through three webinars held at the end of 2020. They provided an opportunity for grantees to share highlights of their efforts and answer questions from the network. The three webinars had an attendance of 33, 26, and 30 respectively. Approximately two-thirds of the survey respondents (n=14) attended or viewed the later recordings of these webinars. Survey responses indicated that five attendees have already accessed the resources resulting from the grant projects. Those who didn’t view these report outs indicated the biggest obstacle to attending was finding the time in their schedule.

Survey respondents rated a series of statements about the value of the grant projects to the network. [See Chart 3]. Respondents were most favorable about the contribution of new resources for the network. Overall, results indicated that network members do see the value of the grant projects to their learning goals, but that, in the future, these connections could be stronger.

Chart 3. Network members rated a series of statements about the 2020 grant projects

Network members see the value-added of the grant projects, but there’s opportunity to strengthen that connection in the future.



PERCEPTIONS OF WOODLAND PARK ZOO AS A GRANTING ORGANIZATION

How is Woodland Park Zoo’s role and management perceived by grantees and ACE Network partners?

Woodland Park Zoo’s perceived performance overseeing the grant program and facilitating the network was assessed through the formative interviews and an end-of-program survey. [See

Summary of ACE for Wildlife Network Interview Findings for WPZ for full report]. Overall the results indicated that:

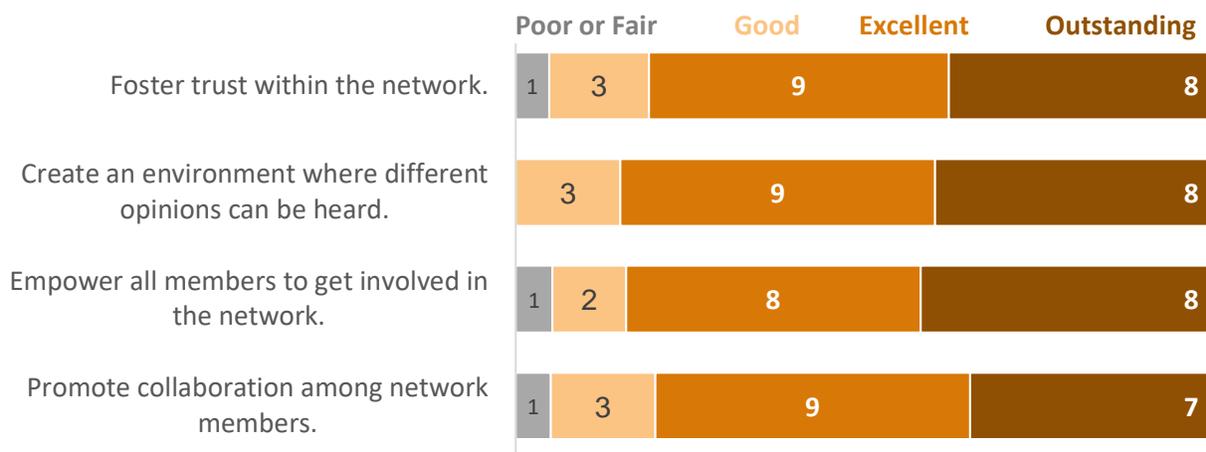
As a grant maker, WPZ was perceived to be responsive to COVID-19 and its challenges. Interviews with grantees found this perceived responsiveness was central to grantee’s positive experiences during the grant management process. They also showed appreciation for Woodland Park Zoo’s demonstrated understanding of the unique setting and challenges involved in conducting grant work in a zoo or aquarium.

The grant application process was seen to be straightforward and accessible, but WPZ’s decision making could be more transparent. In the future grantees would like more clarity around grantmaking strategies and decision-making. The grant program team plans to provide more clarification about the criteria used for decision-making, and invite qualified network members to be involved in future grant decision processes.

There was some confusion among network members about Woodland Park Zoo’s operating model, funding opportunities and staff roles or responsibilities. In the interviews, one participants suggested that the Empathy Project team try to “make it very distinct in the roles of the people”, asking for more clear distinctions on different job responsibilities within the network and grant program. Future phases of the grant program will clearly outline staff roles and responsibilities, communicating a clearer division between those responsible for grant processes and those supporting network priorities.

Similar to the interview results, the survey results showed that most of the respondents viewed Woodland Park Zoo and the Empathy Project team’s performance positively, indicating the team is on the right track to operating these two projects. [See Chart 4]. Survey results also indicated that, although there is a generally positive perception of Woodland Park Zoo’s ability to engender trust and collaboration among the network, there are still opportunities for us to better communicate the leadership opportunities for network members, and to continue decentralizing network decision-making.

Chart 4. Network members rated the Empathy Project Team’s abilities in the following:



OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN GRANTING PROGRAM IN THE FUTURE

As we supported applicants and grantees through the process, it became evident to us that some applicants had more experience with grant writing and the grant process than others. For example, in proposal budgets, only a few applicants included indirect costs. Of the three grantees who did include indirect costs, one grantee asked for clarity on what kind of itemized costs can be counted as indirect.

The conversations with the grantees about their budgets further indicated that there is a lack of understanding across our applicants about what indirect costs are as well as the reasons to include them in a grant proposal. We also learned informally that several of the grantees were spending significantly more time on their proposals than they documented in their budgets. In future iterations of the proposal process, we recognize there are opportunities with this grant program to build knowledge and skills about the grant application process and submitting competitive grants when Woodland Park Zoo models them in the grant proposal process and asks guiding questions at appropriate points in the grant lifecycle.

Eligible grantees have varying levels of experience designing and implementing evaluation at their organizations. Some 2020 grantees miscalculated the time required for their planned activities, and in some cases they were cut altogether. Multiple grantees expressed an interest to improve their ability to conduct evaluation at their organizations. Future grant program processes will provide more support for evaluation capacity in the grant application and implementation, such as resources on how to hire an external evaluator.