

Project Report
Work College Consortium
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Director of Coyote Kids

Goal #1 – To provide a meaningful experience for Sterling College students in the areas of curriculum design and implementation.

Goal #2 – To provide a venue for Sterling college students to teach skills and concepts they have been exposed to throughout their Sterling College education.

Goal #3 – To provide a hands-on learning opportunity for Sterling College students hoping to, or in an exploratory phase, become future educators.

The goal of our project was to launch a forest school program for children ages 5-11. The plan was for Sterling College students to be mentors and teachers for the kids in the program. We definitely met our goal and set up an amazing structure for the program. We ran 100 hours of programming for the year, in two seasonal sessions. Coyote Kids (name of the program) ran for 8 weeks in Oct. and Nov. of 2013. It ran for 7 weeks in May and April and also included a separate Saturday session. All weekly programs ran for 3 hours once a week. Mentors met for a weekly planning session and gained a tremendous amount of skills in organizing activities and being prepared to work with kids. Throughout the year, the Sterling mentors planned and lead activities in fire making, tree identification, wild edibles, tracking, throwing sticks, nature journaling, forest music, adventure walks, nature scavenger hunts, trap making, whittling, cordage, baskets, and bowl and spoon burning. The kids who attended loved being outside and gained new skills in ecology, primitive living, crafts and tracking as well as all the areas of mentor led activities. The ultimate goal was for Sterling students to share their knowledge with local children. Not only did they share it really well, but they had an amazing time doing so. A graduating mentor made the comment that this program “changed her life”.

What have you learned?

As the director I feel as though I have been learning every minute since the program began. First of all, I learned how many similarities there are between an outdoor classroom and an indoor classroom. While the parameters and expectations may be different, good teaching is good teaching. I also learned how important it was for the Sterling College students to have direction, guidance and support. Before beginning, I imagined that all I needed to create was the space and get kids to come. That was far from the truth. In actuality, my weekly planning sessions with the Sterling students were the most important part of the program. I spent a lot of energy modeling how to lead a meeting circle and manage group dynamics. I learned that people may have outdoor skills but it doesn't necessarily translate into knowing how to teach others. Teaching in and of itself is a skill that needs to be

modeled, learned and practiced. It was and will be necessary to have it be an integral part of the program and my relationship with the Sterling students.

Who was engaged in your project?

The project consisted of myself, 6 Sterling College students and 17 children. There were also several visiting elders and a young apprentice. One of our elders was the director of Earthwalk, a similar program in Plainfield, Vermont. Our other elder was a former principal from a local community who was interested in the work we were doing. He came several times to interact with the kids and share his enthusiasm for the program. The apprentice was a local high school student who attended Earthwalk as a younger child and wanted to learn about becoming a mentor. The foundation of nature mentoring is an intergenerational learning community, where all ages and levels come together to share with each other.

The Sterling students involved in Coyote Kids had a variety of strong and important work/learning experiences. During the year I met frequently with students. I provided weekly feedback after each forest school. I also provided group feedback during planning sessions, centered around ways to enhance the program and the mentor's group leading skills and interactions with children. Twice during the year I had private feedback sessions with each mentor. Together we evaluated their work performance and identified areas of growth.

All of the Sterling students responded positively to working in the program.

Malaika is the student who said "you changed my life". As a senior in the agriculture major she was planning to graduate and start farming. As a result of this work, she is also planning to start a nature program on the farm and continue her work with kids.

Another mentor, an outdoor education major, ran a similar program at a local school as an independent study during the second semester. He graduated and is planning on bringing the philosophy of nature mentoring to his work at a juvenile detention home. He also hopes to start a program of his own in the near future.

As a result of the Coyote Kids program, Sterling College will be offering a nature mentoring class next fall and will consider incorporating nature mentoring into their Outdoor Education curriculum. Three of this year's mentors are planning on taking the class and have a new/renewed interest in outdoor education. There are also several students taking the class who are interested in becoming Coyote mentors. In the near future, the class may function as a prerequisite for the program.

In an effort to encourage additional Sterling students to be involved, we offered Coyote Kids as a job for All College Work Day. Two of the regular mentors stayed and we invited 3 other students to join us. We ran the program as usual and the guest mentors were able to

work in those positions. One of the guest mentors is now planning on applying to work with the program next year. The other two showed interest as well.

Throughout the Spring and Fall Coyote Kids session I posted on a weekly blog. This link was given to all the parents and the entire Sterling College community and beyond via the Sterling College website. The mentors from the college also shared the blog with friends and relatives. The blog explains the program, gives program details and provides pictures and weekly anecdotes about the program. coyotekidsnek@blogspot.com

As a result of the blog, program attendance went up for the second semester. The blog was also viewed enthusiastically by a trustee from the Bay and Paul foundation as a result of our professional development collaboration with Earthwalk. He expressed interest in supporting that work in the future. Earthwalk is a nature mentoring program in Plainfield, Vermont. The director of the program provided professional development for us at the beginning of the program, and functioned as an elder for our village. Earthwalk's work with us was supported through this grant and a grant from the Bay and Paul Foundation on their end. Taproot magazine has requested an article about the program as well.

1. Are there any next steps from this research planned?

Coyote Kids will continue to function as a work position for Sterling College students. A class in nature mentoring was added for the Fall semester. The college's outdoor education faculty will spend the year evaluating whether and how to integrate Coyote mentoring into the curriculum. Based on this evaluation process, Sterling College will then look into sponsoring the program. Students from the college are already looking forward to applying to work in next year's program. I already have a list of local children enrolled for the Fall. The program as a whole was an amazing success. Without the funds from this grant, I would not have been able to launch Coyote Kids. Thank you for helping to start an amazing model of learning, mentoring, building community and learning about the earth.

Coyote Kids Research Report

This report is based on pre and post surveys completed by mentors and parents. The results shared are based on the answers from the surveys.

Mentors:

1. Attitudes/perceptions on youth:

In both the pre and the post surveys, mentors felt that "children should be treated as fellow human beings. Children should be talked to as people and not in a "kid" way. They

have an innate relationship to nature that mentors should jump on board with". In the pre survey, one mentor felt that this would be a learning experience for both mentor and kid and hoped for openness from both. In the post survey, mentors also added that it's important to get to know children's lives outside of the mentoring climate. The goal is to connect with them as a whole person. They also felt that kids are incredibly self directed and it's important to support and encourage that.

2. Value of nature programming as a tool for development:

In the pre surveys most mentors spoke about children making a connection to nature that supports them in their life.

In the post surveys the mentors used words like vital, critical, and initiation into life. They identified nature mentoring as important for intergenerational information sharing, the building of supportive 1-1 relationships, learning ones place upon the earth, creating peaceful people who do positive things, creating role models for kids, allowing kids to follow instincts and act out behaviors that are not supported in society (getting muddy, throwing sticks), and for the development of a sense of community while in nature.

3. Value of nature programming as a tool to create environmental ethos:

In the pre surveys mentors spoke about nature programming helping to establish a heightened awareness for children and a sense of connectedness. They also felt that it opened up a child's world and helped them developed skills.

In the post surveys they stated that nature programming builds a bond with the natural world that creates a sense of reverence and respect. This bond allows them to understand that everything they do affects everything else in the natural world. The child has grown to love the earth through being mentored and will make future decisions that are helpful to the environment. Kids feel a deeper connection that allows them to have a balance of appreciation and understanding of how to respect and use nature as a tool.

Comfort levels with curriculum development

Pre – When asked to provide a number between 0-10, most mentors chose 5 or 6.

Post – Numbers were in the 6 and 7 range.

Anecdotally, I saw the numbers go up much higher than this. At the beginning of the year I lead every planning meeting and really created the structure. I led the students through a step by step of each week. By the end, the mentors were leading the planning meetings and I sat back and functioned as another mentor. They were able to lead each other through the steps of each day and make sure all areas were covered.

Self-confidence as an educator

Pre – Again most mentors were in the 5-6 range.

Post – Numbers were again in the 6-7 range.

Again, anecdotally I saw these numbers go up as well. At the beginning of the year, I led many of the circles and took a very hands on approach. At the end, I missed a day and the students did it without me. They covered all nature mentoring areas including interactions with parents and dealing with safety. They all felt very good after that session and showed much confidence in their abilities. One mentor's number went down by one on the post survey. I attribute this to the fact that she got first hand experience with being an educator. Through this experience she realized the degree of work and skill involved and realized how long it takes to get really good at it. She was a mentor who really reflected and strove to improve weekly.

Parents:

Level of child's nature awareness:

In the pre surveys, parents stated that their children all enjoyed an active relationship with nature and spent between 20-50 hours outside per week. In the post surveys, they shared that their children had an enhanced relationship with nature due to the program. Parents observed that their children noticed more and had higher levels of confidence, awareness and skills. One parent stated that "being a part of Coyote Kids is a wonderful affirmation that loving nature is good, right, important and fulfilling.

Skill/competency development:

Parents filled out skill level surveys for each child pre and post. Scores went up in the areas of plant and tree knowledge, fire making, whittling, building shelters, using tools, nature crafts, singing, acting, forest animal knowledge, and storytelling. Anecdotally parents reported a marked change since the beginning of the program in fire making, wild crafting, whittling, using tools, noticing details in the forest, carving, making rope, bowl making, tree tea, throwing sticks, spear and trap making, tracking and using tools.

Self-confidence:

Anecdotally parents reported more self confidence in all of the measured outdoor skills. Several parents pinpointed their child's increased confidence with using tools and identifying plants and animal. They also mentioned more skills in working with others, being part of a mini community.

Effectiveness of mentors:

Parents were asked which mentors their child connected with most. Most parents wrote down "everyone" and then described three mentors that stood out for their child. Some of the quotes are as follows...

"My kids seemed to appreciate clear competence at a task" (for the 3 mentors)

"She likes to do a lot of stuff that I like"

"He taught us how to make traps"

"My son enjoyed her playful side"

“He liked all the activities he instructed”
“Knows a lot about nature”
“Funny and explorative”
“Great outdoor person”
“Fun to play with”
“They make kids feel special and engage with them”

Effectiveness of Coyote Kids:

Parents were asked to rate the program on a scale of 1-10 (ten being the highest). Every parent except two rated it a 10. The rating of 9 was because they wanted the program to be held in the summer as well. A rating of 8 was given for one child because they didn't like smelling the smoke from the campfire. All parents expressed an interest in signing up for the program next year.