Evaluation Executive Summary

Classroom with a Current - Grand Rapids Public Museum

The Classroom with a Current (CWAC) program was a pilot effort by the Grand Rapids Public Museum that operated between April and December 2014. Through CWAC, 25 motivated high school students from in and around Grand Rapids were invited to design a new Great Lakes-themed exhibit for the museum. Students received instruction on exhibit design and on the Great Lakes, and were offered wide latitude to design a concept for the exhibit. Beginning in fall 2014, a subset of seven participants were involved in a second phase of more intensive activity. These students took the design from a concept to a much more detailed vision, meeting in their own dedicated space in the museum. At the close of the program, the students’ design concept was submitted to the Natural Resources Trust Fund as part of an application for funding to build the exhibit.

Student outcomes were evaluated through a pre/post survey including a test of Great Lakes knowledge. A focus group was conducted with the students participating in the program’s second, more intensive phase.

**Evaluation Findings**

***Participants.*** The 25 students who participated in CWAC were **strong students from various area high schools who are highly motivated for postsecondary education**. From an environmental perspective, students have been engaged in a variety of volunteer and school-based environmental efforts. **Sixty-five percent of responding students expressed an interest in the environmental, Great Lakes theme of CWAC when asked what motivated them to participate**. Forty percent mentioned the potential for community impact, and most of these referenced both community and environmental impacts in their response. Other responses included the opportunity to create an exhibit (25%), the opportunity to work in and with the Grand Rapids Public Museum (15%), the opportunity to learn in a different way (15%), and the general desire to “make a difference” (15%).

***Benefits to students from participating.*****Students reported very consistently that CWAC was highly beneficial for the development of their “people” skills**. Other workplace competencies such as time management, developing work plans, and public speaking skills were also strongly endorsed by CWAC participants as benefits of the program. All in all, with its emphasis on student-driven problem solving, **CWAC seems to be an ideal structure for intensive development of workplace competencies, and these benefits are central to students’ overall strong endorsement of the program**.

Students participating in the second phase of CWAC expressed **significant emotional investment in the exhibit**, and talked at some length about the value they associated with being responsible for a genuine product for use in the Grand Rapids Public Museum. The overall flavor of student feedback suggests that **students cared deeply about being entrusted with something important, and also cared deeply that the adults operating the program respected their intellect and abilities**, as demonstrated by their willingness to let the students make weighty decisions, as well as by their supportive attitudes and encouragement.

***Stewardship outcomes.*** Although CWAC students clearly value the environment and it was the leading theme in their descriptions of what motivated them to participate, **there is not a lot of evidence to suggest the CWAC program helped further develop students’ stewardship aspirations and competencies**. Pre‑program data indicates students were already predisposed to support the environment. Measures of five dimensions of stewardship motivations and behaviors declined marginally between the pre- and post-experience surveys. Student scores on the test of Great Lakes knowledge increase by about 5% between pre- and post-experience tests, with relatively high volatility in student scores. Students’ interest in an environmental careers did increase between the pre- and post-experience surveys.

***Recommendations.*** Basedlargely on student recommendations for ways to improve the program, the evaluation recommendations emphasize clarifying what can be clarified for students at the outset of the program while retaining the principle of student choice and ownership, but more aggressively supporting students who may be unprepared to work through ambiguity and complexity. Smaller class sizes, more specific coaching on exhibit design principles, authentic audiences for students’ ideas, and continued coaching on group dynamics were also recommended.

Please see the full report for more detailed information.