

Grantee Close-up: Emerging Leaders Board

What we're learning from investments we've made

As the Brainerd Foundation nears its sunset, we are looking more closely at efforts to build and support the next generation of conservation leaders. One of our grantees, the Oregon Environmental Council (OEC), is doing something few other organizations have tried. Six years ago, OEC created an Emerging Leaders Board (ELB) to increase the engagement of younger Oregonians in its work. Intrigued by this strategy, we took a closer look to see what we can learn from OEC's approach.

How it works

- Approximately 15 young professionals (ages 25–35) are appointed to the ELB for up to two 18-month terms. Each year, its current members use a competitive process to select new members from the greater Portland area.
- The ELB sets annual goals that align with OEC's mission and priorities. Current goals include fundraising through events, supporting OEC programs, and professional development of ELB members.
- The full ELB meets monthly, with additional executive and working committee meetings in between. Members spend about 5–10 hours per month on ELB activities.
- OEC's marketing director staffs the ELB, with other OEC staff providing additional support and guidance as needed.

What we learned

Through conversations with nearly 20 current and former ELB members, OEC staff, and members of its board of directors, we learned a lot about the ELB and what makes it work. Here are our top take-aways.

1. *Young people are eager for this type of opportunity.*
Participation in the ELB is competitive, with nearly ten applicants for every opening. And they aren't just nonprofit professionals. Young people from a wide range of professions have joined the ELB, devoting significant time and energy to its activities.
2. *OEC benefits from the ELB in several ways.*
 - The ELB continually attracts dynamic, passionate young professionals who use their innovative and creative energy to advance OEC's mission. They add capacity to the

Who they are

Since 2010, more than 40 young people have served on the ELB, including:

- A sustainability consultant
- A marketing professional
- A clean energy advisor
- A realtor
- A land use planner
- A nonprofit fundraiser
- A business journalist
- A small business owner
- An academic focused on economic development and equitable planning

What they do

ELB members amplify OEC's message and engage their peers in OEC campaigns and programs, using social media and by organizing events, such as:

- An annual *Get Dirty for Clean Air* night with live music and a silent auction
- An OEC night at a professional soccer game
- An evening with a "stand-up economist" comedian
- A release party for a local, low-carbon beer
- An exclusive screening of a film they produced

organization, and let OEC try new things with less risk.

- The ELB connects OEC to new networks, allies, and businesses, creating new partners and donors for OEC.
- The ELB helps OEC reflect the diversity of the millennial generation. It enables OEC to give younger and more racially diverse Oregonians leadership roles in the organization. And ELB members help hold OEC to its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- The ELB gives a younger, hipper face to OEC. Fun and lively events attract and resonate with younger people. These events provide a welcoming and memorable way for millennials to learn about and engage with OEC.

3. *Members of the ELB also benefit from the experience:*

- ELB members are empowered to be creative and take leadership in the ELB's activities. Together they set goals, plan events, and execute them.
- ELB members gain practical experience with fundraising, event organizing, board governance, mobilizing others, and messaging.
- ELB members build a professional network of peers and develop strong friendships that last long beyond their time on the ELB. One alumnus was the best man in another's wedding. Other alums talk regularly and seek each other out for advice.

HOW OEC BENEFITS:

Making Connections

ELB members leverage their personal and professional networks to support OEC.

Examples include:

- Tapping music industry friends for event entertainment.
- Using video production contacts to create a short film for OEC's climate campaign.
- Partnering with a local brewery to create a low-carbon, climate-friendly beer.
- Inviting art students from Portland State University to design a beer label and silkscreen shirts.
- Donating food for events. (This ELB alum is a restaurateur.)

Why it works

So what's the secret sauce that fuels the ELB? We've narrowed it down to 6 ingredients:

- *OEC gives the ELB considerable autonomy, creativity, and freedom.* This approach engages the talents and passions of a younger generation ready to lead, and enables them to try things OEC staff might not.
- *ELB members take their work seriously.* Emerging leaders make meaningful commitments to the ELB and hold each other accountable. Each member takes the lead on at least one activity or action, and they use committees to get work done.
- *The ELB is diverse in perspectives, professions, and experiences.* This allows for more nuanced discussions, catalyzes new and innovative approaches to their work, and drives them to be intentional about who they reach out to and how.
- *OEC invests staff time* to ensure that the ELB has the support it needs and its activities are aligned with the organization's priorities. Staff have built a strong rapport with ELB members and this makes working together enjoyable for all.

- *OEC's executive leadership and board of directors believe in the ELB* and value its work. This helps ELB members feel proud of their contribution and solidifies their personal commitment to serving on the ELB.
- *The ELB is continually evolving.* In the last six years, the ELB has expanded its size, created working committees, appointed co-chairs, scaled its goals, and focused on various environmental issues. These adjustments have enabled the ELB to conform to the needs and interests of its members without stagnating.

Taking it to the next level

We were impressed by the Emerging Leaders Board and the young people it has engaged. And, as you'd expect, our probe also uncovered some promising opportunities that it has yet to fully explore. Here are some additional ways to expand the impact of an emerging leaders board:

- *Educate young leaders about environmental policy issues and advocacy opportunities.* An emerging leaders board presents a rare venue for young people to have an insider's look at the complexities of an environmental issue and possible paths to success. Make space for policy and advocacy staff to share their knowledge with emerging leaders in order to expand their horizons and the impact of their work.
- *Leverage the millennial perspective of emerging leaders in programmatic, communications, and advocacy work.* Beyond the independent activities of an emerging leaders board, organizations can tap these young people for advice on effectively engaging and communicating with younger audiences.
- *Provide a standard curriculum and series of trainings for emerging leaders.* An emerging leaders board will inherently see turnover in members, creating an environment ripe for training. Recurring topics might include nonprofit governance, reading financials, measuring impact, strategic planning, diversity and equity, legislative advocacy, storytelling, fundraising, personal resilience, and more.
- *Maintain lasting connections with alumni.* Create a mechanism for sustaining a two-way relationship with emerging leaders long after they leave the board. Help alumni with their careers, and cultivate them as passionate environmental leaders. Trust that this will pay dividends to the organization and the broader movement.

Our advice to organizations considering something like this

Deciding to launch an emerging leaders board is no small feat. Below is some of the best advice we heard for setting them up for success:

1. *Be clear about your goals and realistic about expectations.* Why is your organization considering creating an emerging leaders board? Your staff, board of directors, and the emerging leaders you recruit should all have a solid understanding of the board's purpose and intended outcomes from the get-go.
2. *Make sure you have the staff resources to support a cohort of emerging leaders.* To take full advantage of an emerging leaders board and provide a meaningful experience for its members, they will need a staff liaison who can devote an average

of 4–8 hours per week to support the ELB for the first few years. Be sure to also budget funds for leadership development, training, and expenses associated with the group’s activities.

3. *Be willing to provide guidance and autonomy.* Emerging leaders will benefit from guidance on governance structures, education about your organization’s programs, and input on their proposed activities. Give them autonomy to develop creative approaches to fulfilling the goals established for the group, and let their passion drive their work.
4. *Make sure your organization and its emerging leaders measure their impact.* It’s important that progress toward the group’s goals can be easily quantified and measured using your organization’s existing data management systems. Emerging leaders want to know they make a difference, and your organization will benefit from a clear and easy mechanism for evaluating their impact.
5. *Be prepared to forge lasting relationships and cultivate them as life-long ambassadors for your organization.* An emerging leaders board provides a unique opportunity for young people to engage deeply with your organization at a transformational time in their lives. Get to know them personally and help them stay connected with your organization for decades to come. Dedicate staff time to making this happen.

The Bottom Line

Without question, OEC benefits from its Emerging Leaders Board and these young leaders gain valuable experience and connections to advance their careers. However, all of this comes at a cost—in terms of staff time, financial resources, and other paths not taken. Whether an emerging leaders board is the right answer for another organization depends on its objectives and operating environment. And yet we believe this is one of several promising strategies for building the bench of environmental leaders. We are grateful to OEC and ELB members, past and present, for letting us peek under the hood and share what we have learned with others.