



2022 IDEA Needs Assessment Summary & Key Themes

In the spring of 2022, the IDEA Center for Public Gardens™ facilitated a two-part needs assessment to establish a baseline understanding of: 1) public gardens' current initiatives and actions, and 2) future intentions and plans related to IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility) and 3) the biggest barriers and challenges they face related to IDEA work. The first component of the needs assessment was an online survey, distributed via the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) and completed by 177 staff members working at a wide variety of gardens across the United States and Canada. The second component was three online listening sessions, attended by 70 individuals from 35 gardens. This report documents key findings from both methodologies. Reflections on the current state of IDEA in public gardens and plans for the future to inform the IDEA Center's up-coming pilot program (the inaugural cohort begins in May 2022), as well as ongoing training and offerings.

INTRODUCTION TO THE IDEA CENTER FOR PUBLIC GARDENS™

The American Public Gardens Association (the Association), with support from Denver Botanic Gardens (the Gardens) and the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), launched an initiative in 2021 to teach and inspire inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA) initiatives among the Association's public garden members.

The IDEA Center for Public Gardens™ (the Center) funds speakers and trainers at conferences and symposia. It also offers intensive peer-to-peer cohorts to develop next practices as all cultural institutions strive to be more inclusive and relevant. In May 2022, the IDEA Center pilot cohort of gardens launched with 21 gardens participating, all of which went through a rigorous application process. By 2023, a full roster of programming will be offered.

The Center is incubated at Denver Botanic Gardens, which is providing operational funding. Services are supported by an IMLS National Leadership Grant (MG-249862-OMS-21) through 2024. The Association provides the essential link between public gardens and the Center, building upon the Association's already significant resource materials and training opportunities.



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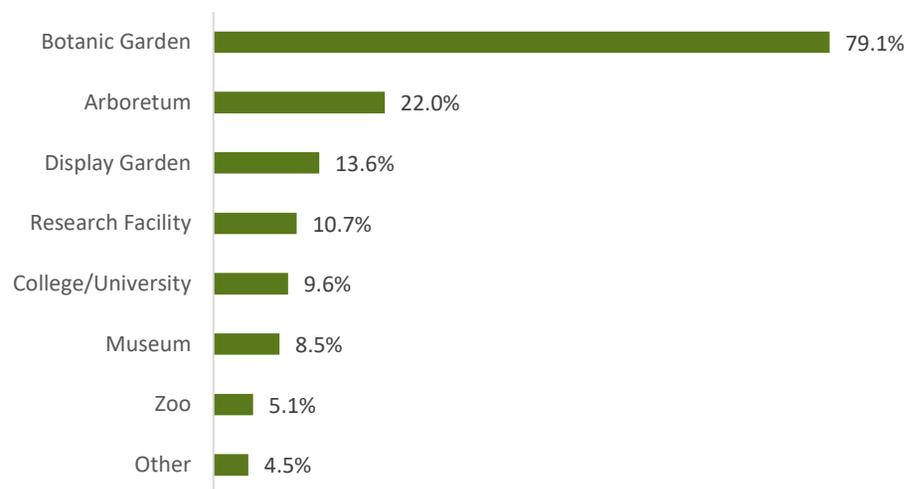
INTRODUCTION TO THE 2022 IDEA NEEDS ASSESSMENT

As part of the IMLS National Leadership Grant (MG-249862-OMS-21), external evaluator Kate Livingston (of [ExposeYourMuseum LLC](#)) designed and developed the needs assessment to better understand and articulate the breadth and depth of IDEA initiatives, efforts, policies, and practices currently underway in public gardens around the country (and internationally). Key variables of interest to the project included (but were not limited to): IDEA-specific staff positions; IDEA working groups and/or initiatives (e.g., staff-led, board-led, etc.); demographics of staff, volunteers/docents, senior leadership, and board; public or community boards and/or affiliate groups; staff unionizing; past and present IDEA training and/or workshops (i.e., for staff, volunteers/docents, and/or board); public-facing IDEA-focused events or programs; public-facing DEAI statement and/or commitment; reflection of IDEA principles and/or inclusion in facilities, signage, and interpretation (e.g., multiple languages; non-gendered restrooms, etc.); and reflection of IDEA principles and/or inclusion within internal documents, policies, and practices (including recruitment, hiring, retention, discipline, and pay). Additionally, the needs assessment was designed to establish what is currently missing from IDEA efforts (as perceived by each participating organization) and what gardens feel is needed to bolster IDEA. This included assessing where gardens have experienced challenges and obstacles in achieving IDEA outcomes and goals. Finally, the needs assessment included looking forward—how to grow and/or sustain IDEA within an organization—and what supports are needed internally and externally to bolster growth, change, and learning.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & KEY THEMES

SECTION 1: CURRENT EFFORTS AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Types of Organizations Represented



As seen on the chart to the left, the majority of respondents represented Botanic Gardens, followed by Arboretums, Display Gardens, and Research Facilities. Colleges and University, Museums, and Zoos were also represented, though at lower rates. The “Other” category included open-ended responses such as nonprofit association, community-based organization, and park. (Eight respondents indicated “Other.”)

Almost all respondents (174 out of 177; 98.3%) indicated that their organization or facility was open to the public.

Current IDEA Activities

Respondents indicated which IDEA commitments, strategies, and initiatives were present in their organization at the time of completing the survey. Leadership commitment to IDEA was high (83%), however leadership reflecting the diversity of communities served was low (83% stating “no”). Similarly, staff commitment was high (78%), but staff reflecting the diversity of communities served was low (73% stating “no”). Volunteers were also not reflective of communities served. Leadership/management support in prioritizing IDEA-related work was high (74%), and over one-third (34%) of respondents indicated they had an IDEA-related staff position. While over half of respondents (53%) indicated IDEA was embedded into their mission, vision, and/or values, a third did not see this—either in their mission, vision, and values (36% or in policies and procedures (including HR; 33%).

Future IDEA Activities

(in order of prevalence)

1) IDEA Plans, Policies, and Initiatives

Respondents indicated that IDEA plans, policies, and/or plans were either underway, planned, or being discussed at their organizations. This included incorporation of IDEA into mission, vision, and values, embedding IDEA into strategic planning, and specific IDEA-related initiatives.

2) Human Resources (including recruitment, pay, and benefits)

Respondents wrote about the human resources efforts planned or underway—including recruitment, staff diversity, pay, and benefits.

3) Training and Professional Development

Respondents indicated that professional development—including training and workshops on topics such as inclusion, anti-racism, and bias—are either currently underway or planned at their organizations. Many noted that training needs to be inclusive, provided to staff at all levels, management/leadership board members/trustees, and volunteers/docents. Several respondents indicated bringing in outside help/consultants for training.

4) IDEA Staff Groups/Committees

Respondents specified that one or more staff groups or committees dedicated to IDEA-related efforts had formed or were forming at their organizations. It appeared that many of these groups grew out of staff interest and that group members were self-selected.

5) Community Partners and Outreach

Respondents wrote about an organizational priority—current or planned—to partner with and/or collaborate with community partners, organizations, or communities. While some respondents provided concrete and specific examples, most efforts referenced were not detailed.

6) Unknown or None

Respondents were either unsure whether there were IDEA-focused efforts, strategies, or initiatives planned or underway at their organizations or indicated that there were not.

7) Evaluation and Assessment

Respondents indicated that evaluation, audits, assessments, and/or other forms of research or data collection were planned or currently underway to inform IDEA-related plans and efforts.

8) Accessibility

Respondents denoted that accessibility was an area where IDEA-related efforts were either planned or underway. This included programs, exhibits, collaborative partnerships, and services with and/or for individuals with limited mobility, individuals with blindness or vision impairments, individuals with deafness or hearing impairments, individuals with neurodiversity and/or on the autism spectrum, and individuals with various disabilities (e.g., physical, intellectual, mental health, etc.). These responses also addressed digital accessibility (e.g., websites, apps, digital programming, etc.), the inclusion of multiple languages (i.e., in signage), and transportation. This category included an overarching sentiment that public gardens are lacking and/or behind as accessible spaces, particularly when it comes to physical accessibility (e.g., wheelchair use, ADA compliance, etc.).

9) IDEA Staff Positions

Respondents indicated that a staff position dedicated to IDEA work was either planned or existed.

Other themes that were less widely represented but present in the data included outside expertise/consultants, discussions/talking, IDEA statements and embedding IDEA in mission/vision/values, board involvement and board diversity, staff programs, diversifying volunteers, docents, and internships, and land acknowledgements.

SECTION 2: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO IDEA

1) Lack of Time/Limited Staff Capacity

Staff capacity or a lack of time as a major challenge or barrier to IDEA-related work. This category also includes several responses related to the amount of time it takes to make transformational changes.

2) Organizational Culture and/or Leadership

The organizational culture at their organization—and/or a lack of commitment from leadership—was a notable challenge to IDEA-related work. Participants highlighted the need for IDEA work to be prioritized and for it to inform all levels of decision-making throughout the organization. This level of support was seen as a precursor to taking action. Listening session participants noted that this can be a particular challenge in smaller organizations. Participants also acknowledged that IDEA committees were often in place but without real authority to take action or make change.

3) Recruitment/Diversity in Hiring

Barriers and challenges were prevalent within Human Resources—namely, in recruiting and hiring diverse candidates. Some responses also included challenge related to retention and growth opportunities for existing staff.

4) Lack of Training and/or Resources

Lack of training or lack of resources as a barrier or challenge in their IDEA-related efforts.

5) Lack of Funding

Lack of money/dedicated funding was a real challenge

6) No Buy-In, Fear, and/or Resistance to Change

Lack of buy-in (from the staff, leadership, and/or board level), fear of change and/or resistance to change, and engrained biases often blocked their organizations from taking IDEA-related actions.

7) Location and/or Size of Garden

The location and/or size of their garden presented a challenge or barrier. For example, the location of the garden being in a “non-diverse area” or a location hard to reach by public transportation. Size of the organization also presented a challenge, especially for smaller gardens.

“I would like to have a common language that all the staff understands. It has been difficult because staff felt divided by what DEI is.”

-Survey Participant

“There is a lot of ‘talking the talk’ and not much ‘walking the walk’ from upper leadership.”

-Survey Participant

8) Lack of Concrete and/or Actionable Plan

Lack of concrete or actionable plans related to IDEA. This included not knowing where or how to start IDEA efforts.

9) Lack of Diversity in Staff

Lack of diversity (e.g., racial diversity) among staff has presented challenges in their IDEA-related work. This appeared to be a particular issue in leadership and management-level positions, and also extended to volunteers.

Other themes that were less widely represented but present in the data included lack of board/trustee diversity, low salaries and/or poor compensation packages, historical inequities and/or negative perception of gardens, lack of visitor, member, and/or donor diversity, lack of volunteer diversity, COVID-19, and staff turnover. Responses could (and often were) coded into more than one category.

SECTION 3: IDEA PRIORITIZATION, ACTION AND SUPPORT

Respondent IDEA Priorities

1) Staff Recruitment and Hiring (i.e., HR)

Listening session participants saw recruitment and hiring as a key area where resources and support were needed. This included a specific staff position dedicated to IDEA work.

2) Inclusive Programming and/or Interpretation

3) Training and Professional Development

This was primarily related to staff training, though leadership, board, and volunteer training needs were also noted. Listening session participants emphasized that training and professional development needed to cut across all levels—from board, leadership, and management to all staff and volunteers.

In addition to training and professional development on IDEA topics, responses also included providing opportunities for staff to expand their career options and pathways—especially staff who may not have been offered these opportunities in the past.

4) Accessibility

This category included physical access (i.e., for disabled individuals), but also included accessibility related to languages, gender, transportation, LGBTQ+ communities, and low-income individuals.

5) Community Partnerships

6) Planning, Policies, and Procedures

7) Staff Diversification

In many cases, there was specific mention of diversity needed at the leadership team level and/or in management. While board diversification was also coded as a separate category, it is often connected with staff diversification and so appears frequently here. Those in the listening sessions acknowledged that diversification of garden staff at all levels—including volunteers—was a necessary step in IDEA work.

“We should be developing relationships with intercultural audiences in our community...”

-Survey Participant

“Make staff feel safe, included, and heard at work.”

-Survey Participant

8) Organizational Culture

Listening session participants believed that internal culture shifts were a necessary first step. This included addressing the perception of gardens as elitist and exclusive, and working to unite around IDEA as an organization-wide commitment.

Other themes that were less widely represented but present in the data included board/trustee diversification, evaluation and assessment, and volunteer diversification. Responses could (and often were) coded into more than one category.

IDEA Support Needed

1) Training and Professional Development

As with earlier questions, this training is often stated as a support needed for all staff, leadership, boards/trustees, and volunteers. Training was specifically mentioned as a way to get individuals past their fears in IDEA work, which can prevent action.

“What if there was a community or group where you could exchange ideas and get feedback?”

-Listening Session Participant

2) Networking, Community, and/or Peer Support

Respondents highlighted that networking—a community of peers with whom they could share and connect around IDEA work—would be a welcome support.

3) Success Stories and Examples of Best Practice

Listening session participants recognized the value of data collection and visitor-informed decision-making as an important step in IDEA work.

4) Leadership and/or Board Support (i.e., IDEA prioritized)

Organizational culture and/or leadership was the second-most cited barrier to IDEA work by survey participants while listening session participants believed that internal culture shifts were a necessary first IDEA-related action step. Institutional fear, lack of buy-in, and/or resistance to change were also cited as challenges to IDEA work. Participants noted the influence of leadership on organizational culture.

5) Vetted Resources (e.g., content, training materials, speakers, policy examples, etc.)

A set of vetted resources that they could trust to support their IDEA efforts. This included training materials, articles/books, a list of reputable IDEA speakers and facilitators, and examples of IDEA plans and policies.

6) Defining the “Why”

Listening session participants articulated the importance of first defining their “why”—whether that be their commitment to IDEA work, the value of their garden to the communities they serve, or the importance of transparency in their work.

Other themes that were less widely represented but present in the data included financial support, time, action plans/policies/procedures, dedicated IDEA staff position(s), and consultants/external expertise. Responses could (and often were) coded into more than one category. Below are quotes from the survey that represent the types of responses received in the most prevalent categories. Themes are in order of their prevalence in the data set.

“Leadership support is critical, but lack of time and resources means that we’re not all on the same page.”

-Survey Participant

SECTION 4: A JOYFUL IDEA JOURNEY

Making IDEA work more joyful and uplifting

How IDEA Work is Supported and Positioned

Listening session participants noted that the way in which IDEA is positioned within their organizations (e.g., a mission-focused commitment or ethical imperative, rather than reactive or performative) affects how people approach and engage with the work. Below is a sample of representative responses from across the three sessions.

“Approaching this work with an open heart; if more people could do that, it would be more joyful.”

-Listening Session Participant

“Focusing more on what can be done and less on what cannot be done.”

“If everyone in the organization actually embraced this work as a positive thing, and not as a negative.... A lot of this comes with a lot of negativity and really hard topics and a lot of distraction because of differing personal beliefs.”

“Having IDEA work not be an awkward conversation anymore.”

“Approaching this work with an open heart; if more people could do that, it would be more joyful.”

“This is good work, it’s ongoing, and focusing on the joyful element—so many of us find this personally joyful—but that can be contagious and wanting to spread that enthusiasm to leadership and others so that they recognize that this isn’t just challenging, difficult work, that it can be joyful and fulfilling.”

“Having our work reflect the messages of IDEA. It’s often on the side; it’s not interwoven.”

“Having leadership show some vulnerability... because this is very human work and it’s nuanced.”

Tangible Results/Indicators of Change

“Smaller achievements and wins that could be seen as making a big difference—like plant labels that have a Native name that allows you to see some movement. It’s a small thing, but it could really bring joy to people to see some movement.”

“A lot of this work takes time to see results, so being patient—and that’s where some frustration can come in.”

“Getting more big wins would be fun—just having more success stories.”

“Taking risks. Could gardens, from a design standpoint, or exhibitions, take risks and do something really different? And what kind of joy would there be there?”

“Actually seeing diverse visitors—actually seeing, as programs change, events, education, seeing more diverse audiences seems to create a lot more excitement because that is a tangible thing that you’re actually able to see.”

“There’s a pressure with having expectations and having tangible results... for people doing this work, feeling that pressure is there. Not having so much of that pressure to see those tangible results so quickly.... On the other side, it is really important to know there would be some progress—that there will be some long-term results... That drives some of the joy and dedication to this work.”

“Agreeing that this is not work that is concrete or always has metrics associated with it.”

“...it could really bring joy to people to see some movement.”

-Listening Session Participant

Network of Support and Vetted Resources

Celebrating together was a noted way to find joy in IDEA work. Comments indicated that there can be great comfort knowing you are not alone in this work:

“Celebrating each other and small wins.”

“Do more to celebrate successes—whether it’s small steps or large, celebrating those successes.”

“Not being the only person of color in the organization. Doing this work is very lonely.”

“Connecting and celebrating together as we connect. Examples were that it wasn’t just one department, it was all the departments in an organization coming together and having this conversation. It was also about reaching out to community leaders or other organizations and sharing and celebrating together. Having a picnic together and being able to talk and have a great and positive conversation. “

“Having ready access to success stories in the garden world and having them available to share.”

“Getting outside perspectives from like-minded folks.”

-Listening Session Participant

“A lot of times when we share within our industry it’s, ‘This is a great finished project that we did—presto!’ But can we share the little baby steps, and the painful, and the startling realizations we had along the way? And how we overcame them, most importantly. Can we share those with others? Because the journey is where we learn the most.”

“Having support is so helpful. Having vetted resources provided through the IDEA Center. Sharing little successes, hearing from others the small changes and small steps that they’ve taken that have had an impact.”

“Getting outside perspectives from like-minded folks. Maybe someone who is doing IDEA work in another garden who isn’t involved in the politics of your institution—how they’re able to accomplish initiatives successfully, but also how they are struggling with some of your institution’s challenges as well.”

Connections Between IDEA Work and Plants/Biodiversity

Participants in the listening sessions made connections between the growth and change they hoped to see in their organizations and biodiversity within plants. There was joy found in these parallels, as well as in remembering the spark and joy that can come from being in gardens:

“Biodiversity is important; human diversity is important. This is such a core value in gardens specifically and it’s a key point to keep people moving along.”

“The awe of plants—those eyes of a first time person who’s coming to see your garden or sees a seed grow into a plant. That first time joy and awe, and reminding ourselves—overworked staff and colleagues—of that joy, and celebrating and sharing it with each other, and telling those stories who are getting that spark themselves for the first time.”

Health and Wellness for Staff

Listening session participants were aware that prioritizing staff health and wellness, including mental health and compensation, was a way to acknowledge the toll that IDEA work can often take:

“One CEO has offered therapy for staff members who are having these conversations and taking on what can be burdensome work of IDEA.”

“Having resources specific for BIPOC employees (e.g., navigating uncomfortable conversations, reporting processes for harassment).”

“Promoting psychological safety; the importance of acknowledging when discussions happen and allowing those discussions to happen. Verbally acknowledging it, allowing it to happen, and honoring the people who are participating in those conversations.”

“The role of compensation for people who take on these responsibilities. Are we asking people to do more in a role? A lot of times, it is someone who is in a minority or a population that we’re trying to attract. Is there something to do there?”

“Having paid internships and not asking our interns to work for free.”

“Our CEO has offered therapy for staff members who are having these conversations and taking on what can be burdensome work of IDEA.”

-Listening Session Participant

SECTION 5: OPPORTUNITIES

General Accessibility and Perception of Gardens

Listening session participants recognized a general lack of accessibility at their gardens. In some cases, this was related to perceptions about what gardens are and who gardens are for, while in other cases this was related to limited programming, services, and accommodations for many types of potential visitors.

“We’ve had some people think we were a country club.”

-Listening Session Participant

“Gardens really haven’t done a great job with being very inclusive to the mobility impaired.”

-Listening Session Participant

Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with physical disabilities were highlighted as a population gardens could better serve, as were deaf and hearing impaired individuals and neurodiverse individuals. Greater accessibility included wheelchair accessibility (e.g., trail access), universal design, and inclusive interpretation.

Multiple Languages and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Listening session participants also noted the prevalence of English-only signage, wayfinding, labels, and programming at many gardens. Multiple language inclusion, as well as multicultural inclusion, was highlighted as an important consideration to take action on. The inclusion of Indigenous and

Native cultures was acknowledged as a specific need.

Unhoused Individuals

Houseless and homeless individuals were recognized as a population that found solace and refuge within several listening session participants’ gardens, but were often unacknowledged or not readily welcomed.

Low-Income Individuals

Listening session participants believed more could be done to accommodate and welcome individuals and families who may not have the means to pay admission at their gardens.

Children and Teens

Participants saw potential in more intentionally working to include children and teens as a unique and important community.

“We have homeless people here often that come, but we have no procedure about being accepting rather than not wanting them here. We’ve never had a conversation on what to do.”

-Listening Session Participant

Transportation

Listening session participants mentioned that, in several cases, their organizations were less accessible or inaccessible without a car. A focus on decreasing or eliminating transportation barriers was discussed.

Diversification of Volunteers and Interns

Participants saw a need to make changes to volunteer and intern programs in order to widen access to more individuals who may be interested.

CONSISTENT FINDINGS ACROSS THE SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS

When examining the survey and listening session data together as a complete needs assessment, several key themes emerge as consistent across the methods. The list below summarizes 16 focus areas that needs assessment participants reiterated as imperative to IDEA work in public gardens:

- Board/trustee commitment
- Leadership (e.g., CEO/Executive Director) commitment
- Staff buy-in
- Organizational prioritization (e.g., resource allocation; time; budget)
- IDEA embedded into policies, procedures, and plans (including mission, vision, and values)
- Concrete and actionable IDEA plans and goals (e.g., embedded into strategic plan)
- IDEA-specific training and professional development for board, leadership, management, staff, and volunteers
- Diversification of board, leadership, management, staff, and volunteers
- Inclusive and equitable recruitment, hiring, compensation, benefits, and retention policies and practices
- Inclusive and accessible programming, exhibits, and interpretation
- Removal and/or mediation of barriers (e.g., pricing, multiple languages, accessible trails, transportation)
- Community partners and collaborations
- Evaluation, audits, and assessments (i.e., indicators of change)
- Community of practice and/or peer support (i.e., network to share challenges, success stories, and best practices)
- Vetted resources (e.g., IDEA plans, trainers and speakers)
- Prioritizing staff health and wellness in IDEA work (especially for BIPOC and other often-tokenized staff members)

NEXT STEPS

The IDEA Center began its inaugural training and professional development program for a cohort of 21 public gardens in May 2022. This pilot program utilized the needs assessment findings presented in this document to inform workshops, projects, and ongoing IDEA training fieldwide. For more information, please contact Mae Lin Plummer, Director of the IDEA Center for Public Gardens, at maelin.plummer@botanicgardens.org.