



Native Plant Trust IDEA Plan Final Project Report

June 1, 2023

Project

Develop a 2-3-year plan incorporating IDEA into all aspects of our organization, with early implementation steps during the APGA year.

Why did you pick your project?

We were struggling to create an effective process and momentum around IDEA and wanted to use the APGA program to structure and guide our effort. We also knew we'd be developing a new five-year strategic plan toward the end of the APGA program, so thought creating a plan for incorporating IDEA into the organization would dovetail into that.

What is changing because of your project?

We succeeded in launching a productive, ongoing discussion about IDEA that involves the staff, board, and some council members. The conversation has also eased the tensions created during our early efforts before the APGA project and resulted in both conceptual and concrete progress, such as:

- Developed a clear statement of the purpose and goals for our IDEA work, which helped get everyone focused and began building dialogue and trust.
- Formed subcommittees to work on four priorities collectively established via dialogue and survey (see summary below).
- Working already to implement some suggestions that do not take a lot of resources, such as alt text on social media images.
- Getting positive responses to the increase in diverse perspectives in our educational programming.
- Staff who identify as LGBTQIA decided to introduce themselves as such at a monthly all-organization meeting, have formed an ongoing cohort, and have worked together on a social media campaign for PRIDE month.
- Seeing more consistent approach to IDEA in the board nomination and selection process.

Who are you making the change for?

Initially, we needed to focus internally—on staff and board—to ensure we are building a workplace and culture with an organic, thoughtful approach to IDEA. As we begin to take actions, the changes may first reach those who are presently a part of Native Plant Trust—members, visitors, course participants, volunteers, and donors. Our long-term goal is to both make the changes and effectively communicate them so that people from diverse communities who do not currently engage with us will feel welcome.

What was your approach?

- Formed an IDEA committee with both board and staff members to help guide the effort.
- Established monthly all-organization meetings with breakout groups and rules of engagement to create a safe space for dialogue. Initial meetings focused on developing the vision, purpose, and goals of our IDEA work.
- Structured the meetings to parallel the APGA curriculum, made all the reference materials available to the staff and board, and documented our discussions.
- Did a benchmark survey to gather perceptions of the organization’s knowledge of, interest in, and commitment to IDEA and a second survey to understand what people thought were the most important issues to focus on first. The result was Knowing Our Audience, Understanding Our History, Land Acknowledgement, and Team Building
- From the meeting minutes, developing a list of the issues and specific solutions, projects, etc. people suggested. That list will be a core document, referenced in the strategic plan and updated regularly as projects get done and new ideas emerge.

What were the challenges you faced (expected and/or unexpected) and how did you work through them?

- Interpersonal dynamics and building trust are always tricky. We had to overcome some residual problems from earlier confrontational discussions. There are also generational and “role in the organization” differences in approach, and different tolerances for process/discussion (that is, on the board and staff there are “just stipulate and take action” people).
- Using the APGA materials as the framework for “what can we do here?” helped created a “neutral” platform for discussion. We also created a set of guiding principles to reinforce respect, listening, and openness and reminded people that 1) being inclusive also means listening to people who may not agree with your approach, and 2) asserting that people “should” think and feel a particular way is not a winning strategy.
- We are still grappling with how to—or even if we can—engage people who are silent participants. To help, we created an anonymous written feedback mechanism so that

people who don't want to speak up in meetings or who have confidential remarks can provide their input.

- The board and staff had not worked closely together in the past, and most of the staff had not met members of the board. Getting staff to feel comfortable speaking up in the board's presence was not as difficult as expected, especially once the set of board members regularly participating stabilized.
- Time: it is hard for everyone to make time for this work in addition to all the other things on their plates.

What were your biggest takeaways / lessons learned?

- It's easy to be too ambitious; we're just now getting started on the project we thought we'd do. That was due to both naivete and the realities of how much time we could consistently devote to the project, given the staff workload.
- It's important to lay the ground work first, which includes establishing shared values and trusted forums for communication.
- Be respectful of personal privacy, as some people deliberately maintain lines between their work and personal lives and do not want to discuss their beliefs, identity, status, etc.
- Language and tone are key—and hard. It's important to recognize that some want nuance, others want boldness in public statements and that both groups can be equally committed to the principles and goals. Also, be patient with generational and cultural differences around language (example, words previously considered rude are now embraced by some communities, but who gets to use them?).

What are resources you used and/or would recommend?

- We found all the APGA resources valuable, though it was hard for people to find the time to delve into everything. Making them available for ongoing reference would help with momentum, as people could access documents when they have time, we can direct new staff and board members to them, etc.

If you were to go back and do things differently, what would you have done?

- Some of the things we'd do differently stem from the fact that we were part of a pilot program and didn't have the benefit of knowing the full curriculum, resources, and homework in advance. If we'd been able to preview the entire trajectory, we might have proposed a less ambitious project. That said, the goal of having a plan is still valid, and the year-long conversation will help shape the organization's new strategic plan.

- Moving in parallel with the APGA curriculum while also working on internal priorities not framed the same way did create some disconnect. It wasn't always clear to everyone how the work of the four action groups fit within the IDEA rubric.
- Our project is ongoing, so we hope we can build some of the "do differently" into the work that's ahead. One example is to circle back to the earlier topics in the APGA curriculum and see if our responses and approaches have changed given that we've been focused on IDEA for the full year.

What advice would you give others?

- Be realistic about where you are as an organization - is everyone already on the same page?
- Realize the process and your particular APGA project may take longer than you think.
- Consensus is important for building momentum, but differences in approach also need to be respected.
- Communication channels need to be thought through and set up at the outset.
- Recognize that some people are verbal communicators and some prefer to write. Use both methods for gathering input/feedback.
- Also recognize that some people will not be comfortable speaking up, so creating an anonymous input mechanism can be useful, especially in the beginning.

What's next for you?

The working groups will continue to focus on the four priorities, while we also act on suggestions that can be implemented as part of our daily work. Actions that require refocusing core programs or significant capital investment are being discussed as part of strategic planning or documented for later implementation (example: accessibility at Garden in the Woods, increasing the number of gender-neutral bathrooms).

Working Groups

The four teams have outlined their approach and have begun their work.

Knowing Our Audience

The Knowing Our Audience action team meets the first Thursday of each month. We initially described our mission as trying to "paint the truest picture possible of our various collaborators – including members, donors, visitors, students, volunteers, and more." To that end, we began by determining what we knew already about these various groups through our primary shared database and social media. We also thought it important to identify other organizations we believed did a good job collecting data from their constituents, and to reach out to them. There is still much work to do. Our early conclusions are that we currently have different departments

– Philanthropy, Public Programs, the Visitor Center, etc. – collecting data in various ways, but there is no uniform, organization-wide strategy behind it. As an organization we should be more data-driven, and to do that we must improve the collection methods we employ.

Learning from Our History

The working group focused on Learning from our History has the goal of uncovering the stories of our founders, from ecologists to horticulturalists, who have shaped our work and whose influence shapes our ongoing narrative about who we are. We also hope to understand more about who has not been part of our history, in terms of disenfranchised groups of people, and how to learn from that as well to make our organization more welcoming to all.

We have met to discuss priorities for action among the group, which have largely been directed toward first getting a sense of what materials are contained in our archives, how they have been stored and catalogued, and how to interpret these materials for internal and external use. We have worked across departments and staff/board to understand personal histories and to begin delving into archival materials with the intention of making our history clearer and more educational for many audiences. We hope to have a sense of the inventories that have been scribed, improve upon them or refine them, and in the process, consider innovative methods to showcase the stories held within these materials, of both people and plants.

Land Acknowledgement

One of the top four priorities of the IDEA working group is not only to develop a land acknowledgement for all our properties in New England, but to engage and empower the voices of, and embrace reciprocity with, Indigenous people whose homelands these are. We seek to learn with respect, humility, and humbleness about the Indigenous groups that used our current lands, and how to reengage with and restore them to these lands. We will acknowledge the past and our current privileged position to hold these lands.

We began by researching examples of land acknowledgements and are now conducting research into the history of ownership and deeds of our properties. However, we recognize the limits of our perspective and are seeking to form respectful relationships with Indigenous tribes to gain knowledge of the role our properties played in their histories and what role they could play in the present day.

We know that developing those relationships is a slow process and also that creating a statement acknowledging those who cared for our lands before us will be hollow without those relationships. We need the benefit of their expertise and experience to write a meaningful land acknowledgement.

However, we feel it is important to make some statement of intention in the near term. To that end, we have drafted a land acknowledgement statement that is currently being reviewed and edited before going to management and the board. The goal is to create a working land acknowledgement that goes beyond stating we are on the lands of Indigenous peoples, but instead, develops an active plan for future engagement with, empowerment of, and reciprocity with the Indigenous tribes.

Team Building

One of the top four priorities of the IDEA working group is to improve employee and interdepartmental relationships through team building and team bonding. Strengthening our team will create a safe and welcoming environment for all staff in the organization. By prioritizing care, respect, and empathy for each other, we will be able to discuss matters in a calm and harmonious way and work together with a strong sense of shared purpose. We hope that once team building has become a regular part of our working life, we will notice improved communication and work partnerships that will further advance the mission of Native Plant Trust.

In our discussions, we agreed that both team building and team bonding are vital to a fulfilling and well-functioning work environment. We also felt it was important to hear from staff members, not only about any proposed activities or initiatives, but first about their experiences working at Native Plant Trust. From this feedback, we have made recommendations for possible implementation.

Strategic Planning

Our 15-year vision statement, completed in 2022, has as its overarching goals stemming biodiversity loss, mitigating the effects of climate change, and incorporating IDEA. That vision statement is the framework for the strategic plan we are currently developing. The planning group contains four members of the IDEA committee, and even in the early stages it is clear that the IDEA conversation is shaping our approach to key goals.