

Amplified Impact: Community-Based Education Training in Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Great Smoky Mountains Institute at
Tremont

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Jessa Goldner, David Reedy, Caleb Carlton



Summary of Assessment

Overview

Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont (Tremont Institute) has partnered with the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (CAC) for a three day residential training of their 2018-2019 AmeriCorps program. This partnership was intended to give Knox CAC members an opportunity to have first-hand, shared experiences to grow as individuals and as a community in the 500,000 acre classroom of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Goals of CAC AmeriCorps Partnership

- Discover a sense of place
- Develop a community
- Build on personal curiosity and wonder
- Discuss theories of change to be practiced with their host organizations
- Create deeper understanding of multicultural values in their target communities
- Increase confidence facilitating experiential and environmental education for their upcoming term of service

Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont

Tremont Institute, a partner of CAC AmeriCorps, facilitated three days of place-based, hands-on learning in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Tremont Institute is passionate about developing pathways of experiential education for individuals in East Tennessee. We achieve this by creating shared experiences for individuals of all ages in and out of the national park that encourage curiosity and wonder. CAC AmeriCorps empowers its members to build capacity for their partner organizations to uplift communities through conservation practices, outreach, education, and program planning and implementation. We believe that training CAC AmeriCorps members will expand Tremont Institute's capacity to reach target communities in East Tennessee by training individuals in cultural competency and best practices in environmental education.

CAC AmeriCorps Local Organizations

- Volunteer East Tennessee
- Bike Walk Knoxville
- CAC Beardsley Farm/Urban Agriculture
- City of Knoxville-Parks and Recreation
- City of Knoxville, Solid Waste
- City of Knoxville, Sustainability
- City of Oak Ridge, Stormwater
- Great Schools Partnership
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park
- Ijams Nature Center
- Keep Blount Beautiful
- Keep Knoxville Beautiful
- Keep Sevier Beautiful
- East Tennessee Permaculture Research Institute
- Girls Inc.
- Goodwill Industries-Knoxville
- Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization (TPO)
- CAC Housing and Energy
- CAC Mobile Meals Kitchen
- Centro Hispano
- City of Knoxville, Community Development
- UT FUTURE
- Nourish Knoxville
- Bridge Refugee Services
- Knox County Soil Conservation District
- Knox County Stormwater
- Sevier Solid Waste, Inc.
- Town of Farragut, Stormwater
- Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)
- University of Tennessee
- US Forest Service
- Water Quality Forum
- Lenoir City- Stormwater



Participants and Procedure

The CAC AmeriCorps group consisted of 55 young professionals. Most participants serve at an organization as the only CAC AmeriCorps member, while others are part of a 2-4 person team. For many members, this was their first year serving in this position with Knox County CAC, but 7 of the members were at the start of their second year with CAC AmeriCorps. In addition, 6 members were at the halfway point in their term of service. To assess the success of the CAC AmeriCorps Orientation at Tremont Institute, participants answered a pre and post assessment that consisted of sixteen questions. 44 participants answered the pre assessment while 42 participants answered the post assessment because of early departures for prior commitments. Analysis of the survey was conducted by generating the percent of participants who chose Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree for each question on both the pre and post assessments. The percent change was then used to see how participants grew throughout the three day orientation at Tremont.

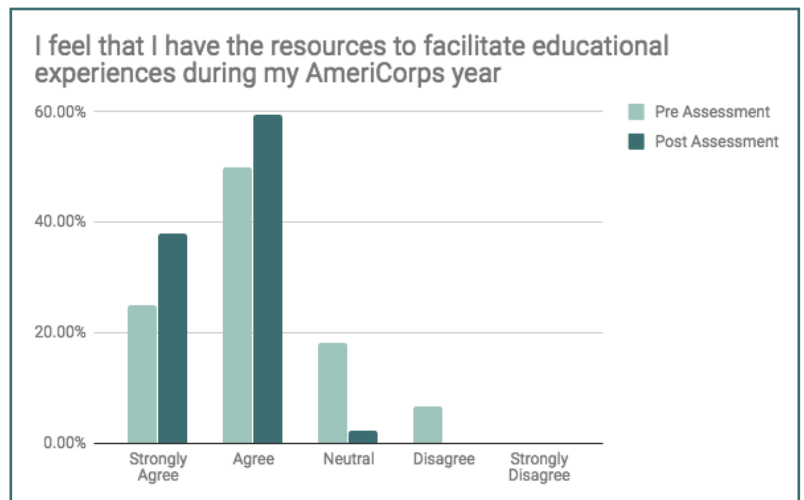


Major Impacts of the 3-day Residential Program at Tremont Institute

1. Participants felt more equipped for their roles with their host organizations:

Examples of program activities include interactive demonstrations of core routines of environmental education, riverside journaling, and “draw a scientist” activities.

- Participants overwhelmingly felt that they had the resources to facilitate educational experiences during their AmeriCorps term.
- CAC experienced a 27% increase in the number of participants who felt confident in their ability to connect an audience to the natural and cultural resources of East Tennessee.
- There was a 9% increase in those that strongly agreed that they could make a positive change in the communities that they would be serving.

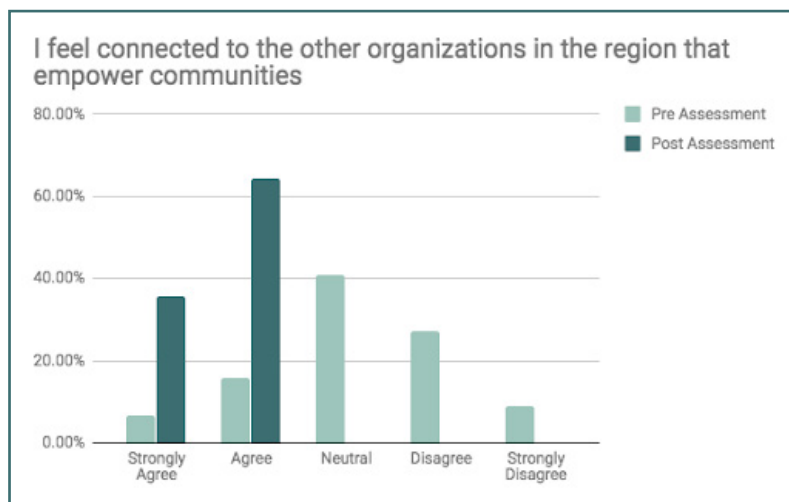


“The staff and AmeriCorps VISTA’s that supported the training activities were thoughtful and reliable and the agenda was powerful and introspective allowing for valuable opportunities for reflection in a place whose majesty communicates implicit significance.”
- Jason Scott, CAC AmeriCorps Program Director

2. Participants gained a better sense of the people and organizations working on human and environmental justice in East Tennessee:

Examples of program activities include reflections on individual host sites, discussions about other organizations in the field, group bonding hike to Spruce Flats waterfall, and fireside storytelling and stargazing.

- The number of participants who felt connected to other organizations in the region that work to empower communities more than quadrupled from 23% of participants to 100% of participants.
- There was a 42% increase to 88% of total participants who felt connected to other members of the East Tennessee community.
- Although many participants entered the program with some knowledge about their host organization, there was a 24% increase to 90% in the number of participants who felt knowledgeable about their AmeriCorps host organizations.

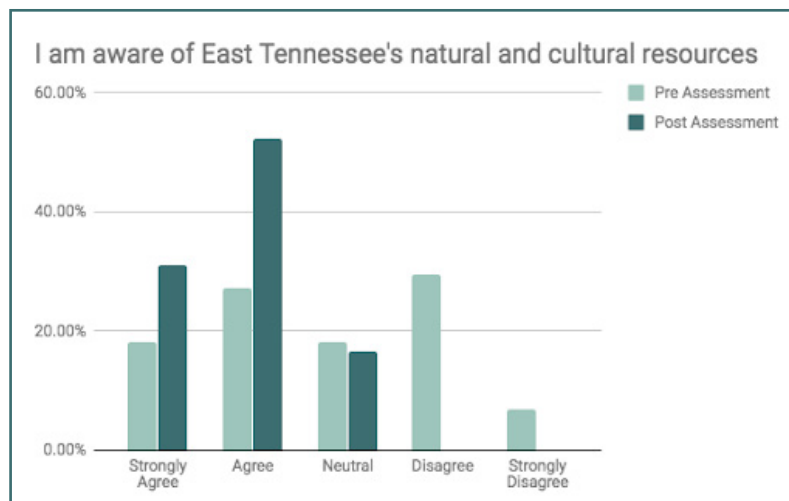


“Being so disconnected from the rest of the world allows you to connect with those around you and truly enjoy and capture the experience. You come not knowing what to expect and leave with a deep appreciation for nature and a sense of peace within yourself.”
- Shannon, participant serving with University of Tennessee

3. Participants felt a stronger connection to place in East Tennessee:

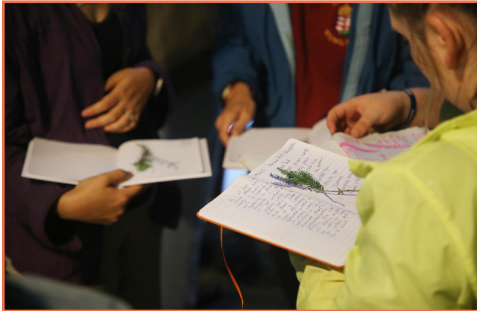
Examples of program activities include a Southern Appalachian story and song hour, night hikes, and nature observation activities.

- CAC AmeriCorps experienced a 38% increase in the number of participants who said that they were aware of East Tennessee’s natural and cultural resources.
- The number of participants who said they were knowledgeable about Great Smoky Mountains National Park more than doubled from 41% to 93% over the course of 3 days in the national park.



4. Participants self-reported a strong understanding of multicultural values and implicit bias at the start of the residential program. The Tremont Institute assessment included questions about understanding of environmental justice, implicit bias, and multicultural values. High levels of self-reported understanding of multicultural values and implicit bias are likely a result of the recruitment process by CAC AmeriCorps. Small percentage increases between the pre and post assessment or consistent results were reported on all questions addressing these issues.

Examples of program activities include “draw a scientist”, group discussions, and personal reflections.



The future of training programs at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont

As a national leader in environmental education, Tremont Institute sees a future in training young professionals poised to make a difference with environmental and community organizations across the country. With 50 years of experience, Tremont Institute has become a trusted agent of change, incorporating environmental education best practices, social and emotional learning pedagogy, and cross-cultural competency into programming.

As demonstrated through this partnership with CAC AmeriCorps, Tremont Institute is able to amplify its impact by training young professionals who will be working or volunteering with organizations focused on improving the environment and strengthening communities. Each young professional trained will be empowered to make positive change in their organizations as they collectively explore environmental education best practices, changemaking institutions, and the importance of a sense of place. Furthermore, by bringing together young professionals through engaging, hands-on trainings, Tremont Institute can build partnership pathways that lead to collaborative approaches to problem solving in communities. The social relationships built will facilitate the sharing of knowledge while encouraging further confidence facilitating educational experiences.

Following the success of the training program with CAC AmeriCorps, Tremont Institute will seek out partnerships that enable the training of local or national groups of young professionals who will become changemakers focused on protecting our environment and strengthening communities.

“The feedback from members in response to this experience was overwhelmingly positive and, as a result, we anticipate extending our partnership with Tremont into the future both for our orientation and as a general training partner.” - *Jason Scott, CAC AmeriCorps Program Director*