

# Summary of Evaluation Findings

Antioch University New England's  
Nature-based Early Childhood Initiative



*Photo by Liza Lowe*

*Prepared for Antioch University New England's Education Department*

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## Overview

The Education Department at Antioch University New England (AUNE or Antioch) has developed a nature-based early childhood education initiative (NbEC) that includes graduate courses, a certificate program, conferences, consultations, and a professional network. A student participating in Antioch's NbEC initiative has several options for how to engage. The Nature-based Early Childhood Certificate program includes four core required courses: Nature-based Early Childhood Curriculum, Business Planning for Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens, Working with Families and Community, and Risk Management for Nature-based Early Childhood. Electives focus on natural history, teaching in winter, landscape analysis and design, movement and storytelling, and a range of other topics. AUNE students enrolled in the Master's degree program for working teachers or a teacher licensure program may also choose to concentrate on nature-based early childhood education. Also, working teachers are welcome to take a course or two as part of their ongoing professional development.

After nearly a decade of growth and evolution, AUNE wanted to systematically reflect on the accomplishments of the academic part of the NbEC initiative, i.e., the graduate courses, certificate, and degree programs. The purposes of this reflection were to better understand the program's effect on participants, and to convey the program's role and reach to Antioch University administrators, funders, and other interested stakeholders.

This ten-year reflection had two components. One was a formal evaluation of participants in the course, certificate, and degree programs, including a discovery-oriented survey and in-depth interviews with a subset of survey respondents. AUNE contracted with an external evaluation firm, PEER Associates, to design and carry out this evaluation. This document presents the results of that evaluation process. The other component was a celebration-oriented prospectus document, including a program history and case study exemplars of selected alumni. That work was simultaneously undertaken by Dr. Cheryl Charles, a Research Scholar in the AUNE Education Department, which can be found at [tinyurl.com/seedstoblooms](http://tinyurl.com/seedstoblooms).

## What were we trying to learn?

1. What work have NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants been doing?
2. How did Antioch contribute to that work?
3. In what ways has/has not the NbEC program advanced equity issues?
4. How could the NbEC program improve?

## What data did we collect?

1. **Surveys:** N=207 NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants were invited to complete an online survey. Between April 30 and June 16, 2021, after up to three email invites plus follow up via Facebook from AUNE staff, N=104 responses were collected, yielding a response rate of 50%. Though this did not reach the target response rate of 70%, AUNE staff reviewed the list of respondents and felt that it was sufficiently representative to generate useful insights about the group of alumni as a whole. An initial draft of the survey tool was revised based on conversations with two alumni who agreed to share their thoughts out loud as they filled out the draft survey.
2. **Interviews:** A PEER evaluator conducted video or phone interviews with n=9 participants in the NbEC program between July 6 and 20, 2021. Interviews were mostly singly, with a couple in pairs, and lasted 40 to 60 minutes each. A sample of n=20 potential interviewees was initially selected from survey respondents who were either: a) flagged by program staff as having particularly useful contributions; or b) recognized by evaluators as survey respondents whose input could be especially valuable in elucidating answers to the evaluation questions. After multiple requests and prompts, nine responded and completed interviews. AUNE program staff were not privy to the final roster of interviewees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed for major themes using qualitative data analysis tools and methods.
3. **Document review, and conversations with program staff:** The NbEC website, brochure, and draft ten-year summary document were reviewed for context. A meeting with AUNE staff and key NbEC stakeholders explored the idea of generating a Logic Model, but we collectively decided to defer in favor of a more explicitly discovery-oriented approach for the evaluation. Regular check in meetings (roughly every other week) with evaluators and key AUNE faculty shaped and refined the design of evaluation tools and sampling.

## What did we learn?

The findings that follow reflect an emergent, iterative integration of the survey and interview data. Preliminary analysis of survey results guided choices about who to interview in order to capture as much variety of perspective as possible during interviews.

Preliminary analysis of the survey results also shaped what questions were asked during interviews. Preliminary analysis of interview results then guided the final analysis of, and integration with, the survey data. In general terms, the survey data were privileged when making inferences about the program as a whole because they reflected the viewpoints of more people, and interview data were primarily used to provide more detailed insight into major themes and/or outlier perspectives. Overall, survey and interview data strongly reinforced each other, which increases confidence in all of the findings.

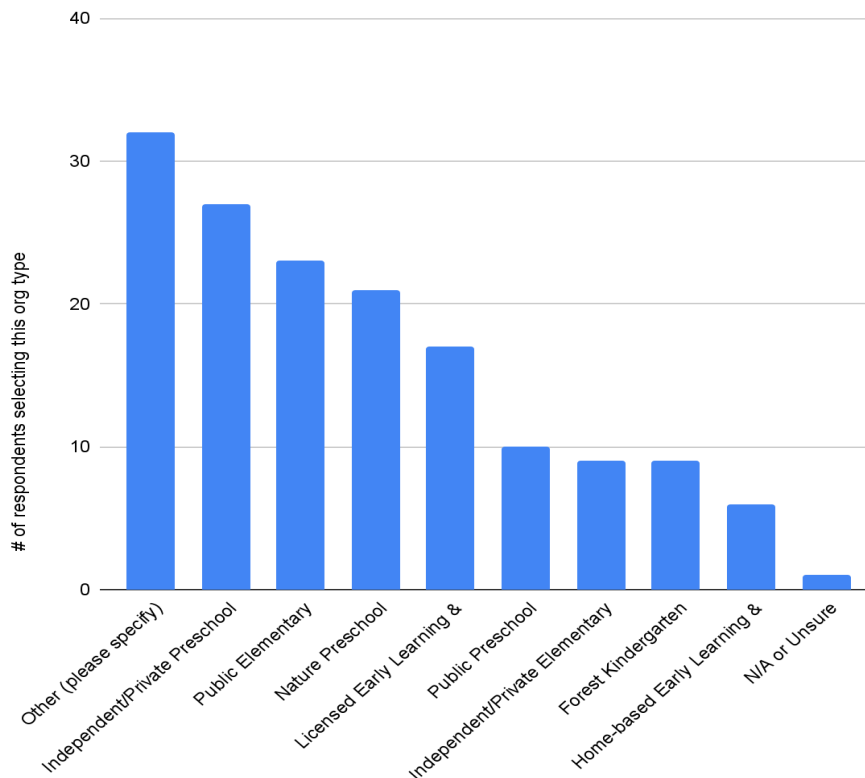
The findings in this section are organized roughly in the sequence of the questions named above in the “What were we trying to learn?” section. Findings 1A-G describe NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants and the work they have been doing. Finding 2 and part of Finding 3 reflect ways in which participants claim to have changed as a result of their NbEC experiences. Part of Finding 3 as well as Findings 4-6 present data focused on the design and implementation of the program. Finding 7 reflects challenges that emerged from the data.

In the subsequent “What does it mean?” section, we synthesize and summarize the findings. Then, in the “What do we recommend?” section, we present ideas for possible program improvements that were offered or sparked by survey and/or interview data.

It is important to note that since evaluation respondents hailed from many years of the program, some of the comments they offered and recommendations that resulted reflect program elements that have already been added, modified, or removed from the program, or were in the process of being addressed prior to this evaluation project.

## Finding 1: NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants have reached a large and varied group of communities, organizations, and children.

- A. Survey respondents were primarily located in northern New England.** Though the survey sample represented participants from 24 states and 1 foreign country (Indonesia), Vermont (n=22), Massachusetts (n=20), New Hampshire (n=16), and Maine (n=10) collectively comprised two-thirds of the sample.
- B. Most survey respondents (62%) identified as “Lead/Classroom Teachers.”** The next most common role designations were “Administrator” (24%), “Program Founder” (20%), and “Environmental Educator” (18%). Roles claimed by less than 10% of respondents included: “Consultant,” “Special Educator,” “Parent,” “Assistant Teacher,” “Paraeducator,” and various specified “other” roles. Note that many respondents claimed more than one role, and so the percentage totals exceed 100%.
- C. Most survey respondents (65%) came to NbEC with an undergraduate degree.** Eighteen percent had achieved a prior Master’s degree, and 3% entered already having a Doctorate degree. The most common content areas for prior degrees were early childhood education (n=15), elementary education (n=13), and environmental education (n=9). The remainder of prior areas of academic study included fields as varied as electrical engineering, textile design, and French.
- D. Besides Antioch, the biggest influences on alumni’s nature-based early childhood work tended more toward the personal than the professional.** By far the most common theme described by survey respondents for this topic was their own childhood experiences in nature. Other frequently mentioned influences included early adult jobs (e.g., at summer camps), and becoming a parent.
- E. Survey respondents have been working in a very wide variety of organizational settings.** Figure 1 shows that independent/private preschools were the most common organization type (n=27), with public elementary (n=23) and nature preschools (n=21) following closely. However, the most common survey response was actually “other” (n=33), specified as “public library,” “non-profit,” “community environmental education center,” and many other types of organization.

**Figure 1. Types of Organizations for NbEC Participants, Spring 2021.**

- F. NbEC course, certificate, and degree participant workplaces reflected a fairly even mix of types of communities served.** Responses were very evenly distributed between “Mostly rural” (n=28), “Mostly urban” (n=23), “Mostly suburban” (n=23), and “Combination” (n=25). The socio-economic status of participating children skewed slightly toward “Mostly middle SES” (n=25), and “Mostly high SES” (n=19), with “Mostly low SES” being selected the least frequently (n=11), and the most frequent choice being “Combination” (n=44).
- G. NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants have collectively reached many thousands of children.** About two-thirds of survey respondents (n=63) could be said to be working in modest-sized programs, characterized by enrollment of less than 100 children (averaging around 25 children), usually 5 days per week. N=15 alumni claimed enrollment of between 100 and 900 children, also usually 5 days per week. One survey respondent claimed an enrollment of “6000+”. Even with NOT counting the high outlier and not counting the 100 or so participants who were invited but did NOT fill out the survey, survey data support a conservative claim of alumni reaching over 3,000 children a year with near daily exposure to nature-based education.



## Finding 2: Survey respondents reported very strong NbEC outcomes.

**A. Numeric survey ratings showed unequivocal evidence of the NbEC program leading to intended outcomes.** Respondents were asked to rate their own achievement and Antioch's contribution to their professional Expertise, Satisfaction, Connectedness, Leadership, Equity practices, as well as observed effects on Children, their Organizations, and their Communities. Table 1 shows very high averages (ranging from 6.7 to 9.6 on a scale of 10) for all items, with 10 on a scale of 10 being the most common response for all items except one.

**Table 1. NbEC Survey Respondent Ratings of Educator Practice and Broader Effect Outcomes, and Attribution of Those Outcomes to Antioch, Spring 2021.**

Agreement with item (from 0 = Not all! to 10 = Totally!)	N (#)	X (average)	SD (Standard Deviation)	Mode (most common)
<b>Aggregate of all 8 educator practice and broader effects items</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Aggregate of all 8 attribution to Antioch items</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>10</b>
I have the professional skills and practical knowledge necessary to be an excellent nature-based early childhood educator	84	8.4	1.8	10
<i>I attribute that expertise to Antioch</i>	82	8.2	1.9	10
I feel personally satisfied being a nature-based early childhood educator	75	9.4	1.2	10
<i>I attribute that satisfaction to Antioch</i>	73	8.0	1.9	10
I feel connected to and supported by a broader community of nature-based early childhood educators	83	7.8	2.3	10
<i>I attribute that feeling of connectedness to Antioch</i>	81	7.7	2.4	10
I am a leader in the field of nature-based early childhood education	78	6.7	3.0	10
<i>I attribute that leadership to Antioch</i>	68	7.2	2.9	10
I apply an equity & justice lens to my nature-based early childhood work	80	8.4	2.1	10
<i>I attribute that equity and justice practice to Antioch</i>	75	6.7	3.1	8
I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on CHILDREN	80	9.6	1.1	10
<i>I attribute those child level effects to Antioch</i>	77	7.8	2.2	10
I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on MY SCHOOL, PROGRAM, &/OR ORGANIZATION	77	8.5	2.2	10
<i>I attribute those organization level effects to Antioch</i>	73	7.4	2.8	10
I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on THE BROADER COMMUNITY	75	7.3	3.0	10
<i>I attribute those community level effects to Antioch</i>	66	6.7	2.8	10

- B. Open-ended items on surveys generally reflected glowingly enthusiastic appreciation for the NbEC experience.** Common themes in responses to questions about the best program elements, and best outcomes experienced, included (but were not limited to) expressions of “hope,” “inspiration,” “confidence,” “community,” and gratitude for “resources,” “skills,” and “tools” acquired. The following quotes give a flavor of many of the responses:

*“The program kick-started my educational focus to be grounded in nature-based work. It helped me to acquire the skills, research and resources, and confidence to implement my after-school program. It also nudged me to earn my Master's degree.”*

*“Antioch provided the framework and the training for me to move from vague dreaming about working with kids in nature-based educational settings to actually doing it.”*

*“I am better equipped to create environmental education curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, to do assessments, risk management, schedule a routine, and lead with joy.”*

*“Antioch showed me what was possible.”*

*“Antioch provided me with a wealth of materials to draw upon as I plan, document, share, and reflect upon my nature-based work and communicate its value to the community. It was a wonderful source of examples--both through physical site visits, conversations with educators, and connections to books and other resources. It gave me so much information to reach out and draw upon whenever I need it!”*

- C. All interviewees offered impressive and varying stories of translating their Antioch experiences into their professional lives in dramatic ways.** The pool of interviewees ranged quite strikingly from a young person at the early stage of their career, using AUNE work to build their confidence to make their childcare work more aligned with nature immersion; to a professional in an advanced stage of their career, using their AUNE work to validate a strong existing program. Interviewees described specific changes they made to their daily practice, as well as shifts at the deeper level of philosophy, values, and program design. They described an enhanced sense of credibility (for their professional practice and their organizations) and feelings of confidence to start (or modify) a program or seek a new job. The following interviewee quotes are illustrative:

*“We really shifted the nature of our summer camps--it was lots of crafts, indoors, stories--it was almost all indoors. But after I went to Antioch, after the Risk Management course in particular, and seeing how these kids spent time outside in all weather, I was like, ‘This is done, I’m no longer doing crafts indoors. We’re going to do something different.’ So I designed Forest Camp, all day, outdoors, for five or six weeks. It was a coup! A real big departure in what we do even though we’re a place that does all*



*outdoor education. It was successful and eye-opening for me, and we had a 40-family waiting list. The shift from spending two hours outdoors with kids to 6-8 hours outdoors was mind-blowing. I was able to shift to relatively low structure, basic themes and it really gave the kids an opportunity to engage their imagination in a way I'd not seen in all my years teaching outdoors for shorter spells. And, our next push was to shift all our winter camps outdoors. Again, just mind-blowing."*

*"Antioch helped me solidify my connection with progressive education, and gave me a solid foundation on what it means to be able to talk to it and be able to center my whole teaching life back to it so that I can have the thing that holds me accountable."*

*"I feel more confident talking to parents about risk. I think it's educating parents about children's innate ability to climb trees, and [encouraging parents to let kids] experience their own abilities, not have parents try to control what the children need to do outside. So it's really about educating parents, period. I think that's the big thing. I think Antioch has helped me through that."*

*"Antioch just kind of blew open my doors.... The biggest thing is that it gave me the confidence that I was on the right track. And that kids can handle it. And so we expanded and deepened what we were doing."*

*"So, there's that connection, where a foundation built within an Antioch class later channeled into my Master's program, and I was able to publish that work in the International Journal for Environmental Education. So, there you see the layers of impact that it's had on me and others."*

### Finding 3: Networking was both a cause and an effect of the NbEC program.

- A. In both surveys and interviews, NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants appreciated becoming part of a "community of like-minded educators."** All interviewees described ways in which they were still connected to Antioch colleagues and community members. They described regional gatherings of alumni and extended networks, calling friends for advice, getting or giving course recommendations, problem-solving work issues, and connecting at conferences. They described how a personal and professional community was formed during their AUNE experiences. Many survey respondents cited "networking" with "classmates," and "other NbEC professionals" as the best outcome of their Antioch experience. The following quotes are just some of the ways alumni expressed this theme:

*"[Networking] was one of the big takeaways from Antioch. Being in person, immersed, and being around people that are really committed to this type of work, it was very empowering."*

*"I have my cohort that I can lean on for whatever I need, so the program was fantastic and the connections I've formed I've held onto."*

*"One thing that I came away with from Antioch was basically I was like, 'These are my people'.... And you don't just meet people in your region, you meet people from all over the country."*

*"Relationships are at the core of our work, best built through face-to-face outdoor learning experiences! Practicing what we preach! The [Antioch] culture is incredibly inclusive and welcoming. It quickly made me at ease to take new risks and grow as an educator and leader."*

*"[Antioch gave me] a professional network to fall back on and pull from."*

**B. In Bloom conferences, the Inside-Outside network, and Webinars were popular and effective mechanisms for networking and support.** Two-thirds of survey respondents reported attending at least one In Bloom conference, with over half having attended 2-4 times. Over half of survey respondents reported being Inside-Outside network members, and over half reported accessing NbEC webinars. NbEC publications and film viewings were also frequently accessed, though not by as many survey respondents (33% and 24% respectively). Interviewees felt that AUNE did "a great job" keeping them feeling connected via mechanisms such as social media, receiving In Bloom and Inside-Outside communications, dinners at professors' houses during a program week, and initiating AUNE reunion gatherings at events like the Natural Start Alliance conference. Interviewees expressed a strong sense that AUNE had intentionally built a coherent community to help them through the program and to help them navigate their professional path post-AUNE.

## Finding 4: NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants appreciated the hands-on, flexible, and professional program.

**A. Antioch's hands-on approach was highly valued.** Survey respondents and interviewees repeatedly used words like "applicable," "practical," "experiential," "immersive," and "real-world" to describe what was best about their coursework. Interviewees described how Antioch's practitioner-oriented approach to education made the NbEC program both attractive at first, and effective in the end. Here are a few quotes that capture the essence of this sentiment:

*"The coursework and In Bloom conferences offer hands-on experiences that made it easy for me to digest the material and decide how to best apply it in my own programming."*

*"Any and all in-person fieldwork was profoundly helpful. Having our professor accompany us while we shared experiences as students, witnessing the modeling, and then being able to carry that out to our students. It was hands-on, present, judgment-free, true experiential learning."*

*"Seeing nature-based programs in action...I'll never forget the kids, the structures, the landscapes, the beauty."*

*"That's why [the Risk Management] class was so awesome. It's because you didn't talk about it. You did it. You were there. You saw the kids on a daily basis, and for a full week. That's what people need--hands-on practical ways to make it happen, being outside, because then they'll feel more confident in what to do."*

*"Everything that I did at Antioch was real life. Like in the business class I'm creating work that I can use. And in the curriculum class, I'm writing a curriculum that I can actually go use, you know, next week."*

## **B. Antioch's flexibility and multiple options for involvement were highly valued.**

Interviewees and survey respondents appreciated the ability to take some courses remotely, a mix of in-person classes with virtual classes, independent study options, or transfer credits. The limited residence format of one-week and two-day course blocks rather than weekly one-hour meetings made it possible for working professionals to participate. It also helped the NbEC program continue through the pandemic. Though being local did increase access to many networking opportunities, the program structure was still flexible enough to accommodate deep participation from all over the country. Several alumni also appreciated the flexible approach to pedagogy.

*"The first three courses were only one-credit courses. This allowed me time to adjust to going back to school."*

*"I love your programs and the formats of weekend and two-week summer courses. That was convenient and the certification was economical."*

*"I was able to prove that I understood the syllabus, I understood the goal, I'm already living into that so for me it wasn't going to build foundational knowledge I needed. So we came up with alternatives, I did an independent study."*

*"[The Antioch coursework] basically turned my dream of my whole entire life into reality, starting a school. The thing about the program is I felt like they made me wake up and say, 'Look, you don't have to be solely all nature or all Montessori.'"*

*"I took the design course virtually over the summer of 2020 and found it extremely valuable."*

*"While COVID has upended everything, it did give me the opportunity to participate in this [Risk Management class] virtually. I understand that doing it in person would have been great but I did not have the resources to do that."*

- C. Participants chose Antioch NbEC mostly because of its location, reputation, and/or legitimacy.** Survey and interview questions asking alumni to compare Antioch to other nature-based training suggested that Antioch was on the leading edge of filling a genuine market need. In the words of one interviewee, "I poked around and the only game in town was Antioch." Many NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants (n=9 interviewees, n=10 survey respondents) only considered Antioch for their nature-based education training. Competitors that were considered by some survey respondents included: CedarSong (n=16), Tinkergarten (n=16), ERAFANS (n=7), Forest School Teachers Institute (n=6), Prescott College Summer Institute (n=4), and a few others with only one mention. The following quotes are representative of reasons alumni gave for choosing Antioch:

*"Antioch offered exactly what I was interested in learning."*

*"The location! Also, the program organization and staff were extremely welcoming and made it easy to commit financially. The other programs were attractive but ultimately having the certificate from Antioch felt much more professional."*

*"Reputable faculty, hybrid-style coursework, practical nature of the coursework."*

*"I spoke with three different Directors of Nature Preschools in my area and every single one said that an Antioch certificate would be more effort and take more time but would also be more meaningful for my work."*

*"Working with David Sobel was a draw for me."*

*"I wanted to make sure that when people came [to my program], they felt like there was some education behind what I was saying. It's not just my own bubble, but we have backing. That's what the certificate did."*

*"Nothing even came close. It was robust, it was a certificate program."*

## Finding 5: The curriculum was anchored by three core classes and a solid faculty, and was augmented by the certificate offering.

**A. Three core classes were pervasively applauded: Risk Management for Nature-based Early Childhood, Nature-based Early Childhood Curriculum, and Business Planning for Nature Preschools & Forest Kindergartens.** Survey and interview data strongly reinforced each other on this point. The Risk Management course cut to the heart of one of the most potent challenges advocates for this kind of work face, i.e., addressing fears and concerns of parents and administrators. This course was also mentioned for the warm community that was developed over the week of being together participating in a real life, successful program at The Juniper Hill School. The Curriculum course was appreciated for introducing and/or reinforcing the practical details of nature-based early childhood work in a useful way. The Business course helped students sharpen their values for application in designing their own programs or finding satisfying employment in existing programs. Electives were also valued but mentioned far less often than the top three. Illustrative quotes include:

*"Risk is the thing that makes nature play a little different than other types of education. So I really think that's why the risk course was so beneficial--it's addressing something that isn't addressed in other early childhood programs, not in the way that it needs anyway."*

*"The curriculum class helped me ground myself and open the doors of how to show my [public elementary school] administration and other teachers that you can do the curriculum outside and it's possible."*

*"The business course had us think about our 'Why'--we had to draft our philosophy and statement of purpose. So I had that loosely for the class, and then I later really fine-tuned it into five areas.... We then used those five key areas to frame our evaluation!"*

*"Antioch gave me the tools to start the business I have today. I still use resources from the curriculum course in planning activities. The business planning course gave me many of the tools necessary to start my program. The risk management course helped build my confidence in defending children's risky play to current and prospective families. I believe my degree program in general, with so many enriching experiences and time spent with my cohort, was important to my work."*

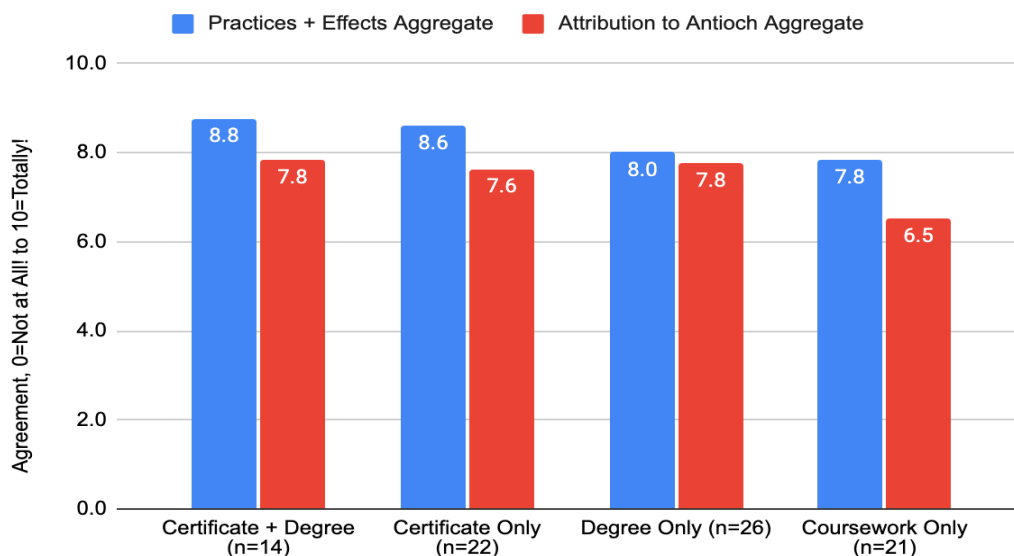
**B. Faculty were appreciated as much as the course content.** Just a few of the many flattering phrases interviewees and survey respondents used to describe professors included "personable, amazing, lovely," "key," "absolutely wonderful, supportive, and encouraging," and "excellent and authentic." Many specific professors were named. One

interviewee captured a general sentiment about the future legacy of the Antioch NbEC program by saying:

*“When people like David and Ellen [program leaders] leave, you’ll be able to look at all these other people [hailing from the program] who are presenting out there and doing this work. So yes, that will inspire the next students to the program.”*

- C. The certificate added value to the Master’s degree.** The NbEC program offers several different pathways or levels of involvement. AUNE staff were curious whether the program had different effects for participants with different types or levels of involvement. Table 1 in Finding 2 above shows that reports of achievement and Antioch’s contribution to that achievement were very high across the board. Figure 2 below, however, shows that survey respondents who earned a certificate reported higher outcomes ( $X=8.8$  or  $X=8.6$ ) as compared to respondents who received a Master’s degree but not the certificate ( $X=8.0$ ) or those who only did some nature-based coursework and did not get a degree ( $X=7.8$ ). The ratings for attribution of effects to Antioch followed a similar pattern, notably that respondents with the least involvement reported the least influence of Antioch (Coursework only aggregate attribution  $X=6.5$ ). Higher ratings from certificate earners could reflect a stronger focus and intention on the part of the learner and/or it could reflect structural advantages of the program. The difference between groups was small but statistically significant ( $\alpha=.13$ ,  $t=.00$ ). There was not enough statistical power in the survey data and the interview sample was too small to warrant a search for finer-grained distinctions between these groups.

**Figure 2. Aggregate Ratings of Five Educator Practice Outcomes Plus Three Broader Effects Outcomes as a Function of NbEC Coursework, Spring 2021**





## Finding 6: The NbEC has begun to address equity<sup>1</sup> and inclusion issues but has more work to do.

**A. Participants described integrating equity issues as important but difficult.** In both survey and interview data there was a general tone that AUNE is trying but could do more or better, and that they should aim to infuse equity work “throughout everything” as well as offer a separate class. Some illustrative quotes include:

*“There were some suggestions made about bringing elements of nature inside and using the spaces on the playground or surrounding area as inspiration, but I would love to see a greater depth of exploration into how the many educators in urban settings could bring the power of nature education creatively into their learning spaces. I’d love to see practical examples and suggestions for this.”*

*“[I would like to see] greater diversity of the (AUNE) student population and faculty, and better integration of justice, access, and equity into the courses [and] curriculum.”*

*“I think that Antioch has an institutional obligation to do their work in equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. I think there are certain structural challenges that are always going to be out of their control, and yet that doesn’t mean they can’t, you know, confront them all the time. But I think it’s really hard to recruit educators from different backgrounds who want to do this work, because of institutional racism.”*

*“Equity work and DEI work should be a stronger aspect of any program for educators. There is a lot to be learned and we didn’t touch upon it other than in one of the courses: Working with Families.”*

*“I think that this is something that everybody at Antioch really understands needs to be addressed and is working really hard at finding a way to do that.”*

*“We need nature-based education inclusion evangelists. We need to be explaining to people that this can work, but we need to teach about it, we need to talk about the resources. It’s continuing to have the conversation, and integrating it into the teaching. It should come up in all the classes.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the wide range of ways participants in this data set referred to issues of equity, justice, and inclusion, the word equity is being used in this report as a very broad catch-all term, not a specific definition. Participants referred to the importance of including people from increasingly diverse racial and cultural groups, income levels, geographies, age groups, and with varying learning styles or abilities. Participants also referred to issues of equity of access and inclusion in programs for all levels of audiences, from the faculty and staff engaged with Antioch to the students participating in Antioch programs, to the youngsters who engage in the activities provided by Antioch participants. More precisely defining and operationalizing terms like equity, inclusion, access, and/or justice for the NbEC program is part of the work Antioch may choose to do in responding to some of the recommendations in this report.

## Finding 7: Program challenges and/or suggestions for improvement were more outliers than convergent themes.

As described above in Finding 2, NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants' feedback about the program was extremely positive on the whole. As further evidence, for the survey item asking for improvements to the program (and including the phrase "Critical or negative feedback is super helpful!"), 20% of respondents left the item blank and 14% responded with some version of "I can't think of anything." The one theme that was common enough across both surveys and interviews to warrant its own finding statement (Finding 6 above) is the idea of wanting more focus on equity issues. The rest of the ideas for improvement should be considered as outliers, with program staff deciding on a case-by-case basis how actionable each might be. They are presented below loosely in order of ideas mentioned by several alumni to ideas mentioned by one or two alumni. In some cases, there are further suggestions for ways to address these challenges in the Recommendations section that follows.

### A. Participants wanted even more networking opportunities.

*"I wish there was a better way to stay in touch with other graduates and see how their work is going."*

### B. Some participants perceived an inconsistency and lack of timeliness in grading.

*"As a student, I was frustrated that the guest (or adjunct) professors didn't know what they were doing, in terms of organization, not content."*

*"It took four years to get the certificate itself from them. And I heard others complaining about this too. It was literally my only beef with [AUNE]."*

*"The grading is ambivalent, fluid. I was never sure what it meant and there was no way to translate it."*

### C. Financial considerations, including tuition, travel, and lodging were more of a barrier for folks living at a distance from AUNE, but the cost of tuition was also prohibitive for some.

*"I would have done the whole [certificate] program but the tuition cost stopped me short of completing."*

*"Cost! I am so close to finishing the Master's program. But I just can't afford it."*

*"I took advantage of the 'try-it' lower cost first 3 credits, then hesitated to sign up for more classes because of the cost. Please do not take this the wrong way--I understand that universities are costly to run, and have a lot more infrastructure than just an informal peer learning group."*

**D. Classwork was less supportive of those working in urban environments.**

*"It would be great if classes explored connecting children with nature in very urban settings, where nature is not as expansive and maybe a little bit harder to find."*

**E. More preparation needed for working with children with special needs.**

*"I would be interested in adding coursework specifically related to inclusion, special ed, and educating for diversity within nature-based education as required work to complete the certificate/MA with a nature-based education focus."*

*"I would have liked to see more content and discussion, even a dedicated course (if this doesn't already exist) related to meeting the needs of children with diverse mobility, trauma, social-emotional, and other developmental needs within nature-based education programming."*

**F. Better communication about course schedules, options, requirements, or sequencing.**

*"It gets tricky if you're trying to plan things out in advance--between work, family, travel, and school, it gets tricky. It would help to be confident that certain courses would be running in advance, even next semester. This felt disorganized at times."*

*"They're a little too hands-off, so it delayed me finishing the program."*

**G. Business course could add depth.**

*"I thought the Business planning class was a good start, but it wasn't enough to be ready for running a business. I would have also appreciated looking at the business plans for more than one model (a nature preschool at a nature center) and talking about the realities of running/owning your own business. It's one thing to love being with children in nature but it's quite another to be a business owner with a young family."*

**H. Early childhood age range of students was too narrow.**

*"Early Childhood Education also includes infants and toddlers and I feel that this age range was really left out of the equation. The reality I have experienced is that childcare is necessary in our society and that oftentimes parents have to choose childcare settings over preschools and nature programs with strict hours."*

*"I would have loved more about outdoor work with older kids."*

**I. Navigating AUNE's website was confusing for several respondents.**

*"I tried several times to refer friends to Antioch classes and it has backfired on several occasions because they went to the website and could not find what they were looking for."*

## **J. Comments or ideas about specific courses.**

*"I think an internship, either a brief intensive or semester-long, would be a good complement to the program."*

*"Class on pedagogy/child development needed."*

*"[We needed] some classes aimed at folks who want to bring this pedagogy into the public school setting."*

*"A course that helps guide an educator through the process of making their voice heard among government officials who are in positions to make a difference in early childhood education."*

*"Expand the Natural History for Early Childhood course so that it covers three or four seasons."*

*"An alternative nature-based offering for the philosophy class."*

*"Background/content for teachers is great, like New England flora/fauna, or tracking, ... or skills like knot tying, lashing, tarp hanging/shelter building, fire building, survival skills."*

*"I think having more opportunities for learning from/observing schools or programs would be beneficial."*

*"I think there should have been an intro to nature-based ed. course, since many of our classes overlapped books, readings, and coursework."*

*"Some of the coursework is repetitive (for example: Risk and Curriculum overlap) and not necessary for those who have experience."*

*"The only class I didn't enjoy or haven't used is the Storytelling sessions. That class was very specific in how you had to tell stories and work with children.... Flexibility is so crucial."*

*"More connections and coursework related to ag and the plant sciences including soil science...foraging with children workshops, early skills in animal care, soil health and preservation...."*

## What does it mean?

**Summary Point 1: Participant experience of the Antioch NbEC program was overwhelmingly positive and led to varied and notable benefits for participants in their careers.**

Both quantitative and qualitative data pointed unambiguously to alumni having thoroughly enjoyed their educational experience, having used their learning to improve their professional lives and organizations, and attributing much of their new skills and confidence directly to Antioch. This was consistent across a wide range of personal and professional demographics.

**Summary Point 2: The evaluation provided strong evidence in support of the main structural pieces of the AUNE NbEC program.**

Having multiple options for entry points into and pathways through the program satisfied a wide variety of students. They could plug in via In-Bloom conferences, stand-alone coursework, or various Master's Degree options, and then add functional value with a certificate, and finally stay connected through the Inside-Outside network. The core classes and faculty were nearly universally applauded by alumni. The balance of in-person and virtual coursework accommodated diverse geographies and life situations for NbEC participants.

**Summary Point 3: Refinements could focus on equity and networking.**

Though strengths far outweighed challenges in this evaluation, the biggest areas for improvement are likely in strengthening equity content in programming, and in capitalizing upon and extending the strong foundation of networking and community that already exists among NbEC course, certificate, and degree participants.

## What do we recommend?

The recommendations below either came directly from respondents or came from evaluator reflections on respondent data.

### Recommendation 1: Strengthen equity content throughout the NbEC program.

#### A. Explicitly claim an equity stance.

*“They could be more upfront with [equity]. This is who we are, this is what we do, this is how we’re addressing this work. Put it right there on the website.”*

#### B. Create a course on equity, social justice, and inclusion.

*“Offer a specific class on urban nature-based [education], teaching the intricacies of that because it’s different. I think they just literally need to hit it right on the nose and offer urban nature-based early childhood as one of their tenets.”*

#### C. Make equity a more explicit line of inquiry that runs through every course.

Consider creating a course content checklist that includes questions such as: How can educators select a classroom book set that addresses equity issues? What’s the history of your place and cultural traditions (e.g., “when teaching maple sugaring in Vermont, exploring the history of native people sugaring rather than just white people sugaring”)? How can you talk proactively to parents about diversity? How can we bolster equity and inclusion in nature-based programming, when many or most nature-based programs are self-selecting for white privilege for various reasons? How is equity addressed in each work product?

#### D. Add an equity component to the Business course.

Because of its focus on values, this class could have a specific section dedicated to inclusion and anti-bias in nature-based early childhood, also addressing issues of accessibility and special education.

#### E. Add BIPOC voices and faces.

Bring in more voices from educators (e.g., professors, adjunct faculty, guest speakers, and field trip site hosts) who are working in classrooms that are multicultural, urban, and/or socioeconomically diverse.

### Recommendation 2: Implement an alumni networking plan.

#### A. Organize the names and numbers of all classmates in one place.

Include a public version on the website as well as an internal version with more detail that is based on the contact list built for this evaluation.



- B. Be more systematic about outreach communication.** Consider creating schedules for when certain types of communications happen, both for logistical messages and for marketing or networking purposes. Use numerous modalities, recognizing that not all students use the same (or any!) social media platforms.
- C. Consider some kind of “Directors Retreat” or “Refresher Courses.”** They could be targeted to alumni who are deeply engaged with doing nature-based programs coming together for an extended time. They could also offer opportunities for site visits to students who missed out on some in-person site visits due to the pandemic last year.
- D. Offer short continuing education and professional development classes.** For instance, one-day workshop or weekend courses in tree identification, deciduous plants, songs, seasonal teaching tips, or shared work projects at different schools.
- E. Create a site visit or alumni exchange program.** Site visits were universally a highlight. Antioch could create a tool that allows alumni to sign up for site visits hosted/ sponsored by Antioch and/or that facilitates alumni connecting informally with each other.
- F. Explore means of formally recognizing and acknowledging alumni successes.** Use In-Bloom or other national conferences as a venue to publicly celebrate individuals and to generate media worthy notices.
- G. Facilitate affinity groups within and between alumni cohorts.** They could be based around organizational settings, grade levels taught, and/or other areas of professional focus.
- H. Formalize connections between the Inside-Outside network and as many aspects of Antioch NbEC programming as reasonably possible.** Perhaps there are creative ways that network participation could be officially integrated into coursework in a way that serves both current and former students.

**Recommendation 3: Create a standardized orientation packet for all faculty, with a commitment to specific training for adjunct, affiliate, or guest faculty.**

- A. An addendum to the existing orientation materials** for faculty may be warranted.
- B. Include guidelines and expectations** for consistency and timeliness of grading.
- C. Include the equity checklist** described above.
- D. Include a timeline with key logistical events**, e.g., notification to students of course dates/times, books to purchase, and graded products to be submitted.
- E. Track faculty compliance** with meeting communication deadlines.

## Recommendation 4: Create a mechanism for documenting and sharing case study exemplars of systems change.

- A. Focus on alumni who have made significant changes in different contexts**, e.g., public or private schools, urban or rural settings. Document the conditions they experienced and how they may have overcome hurdles.
- B. Use the case stories as catalysts** for alumni discussions or events, as promotional material on the website, and as content to study in various courses. Integrate these with the case study work Dr. Charles is doing.

## Recommendation 5: Expand scholarship opportunities.

- A. Protect and grow the fellowship program.** Several alumni commented how fellowships made it possible for them to participate in the program. Both Environmental Education and Early Childhood Education are traditionally low-paid professions, and thus tuition and travel can be barriers to participation at Antioch.

## Recommendation 6: Explore the possibility of partnerships with other universities--both graduate and undergraduate programs--to offer AUNE's NbEC as a "study abroad" option or a modular concentration or a minor.

This would serve undergraduate early education majors who complete an entire four years of early childhood educator preparation and can (as one interviewee phrased it) "sense this missing hole but not know what was supposed to fill it". The modular concentration might serve as a minor for such undergraduates, and could also serve those in education master's programs who want to attend their full program in a home state, but officially include a concentration in NbEC through Antioch.

*"During my undergrad, no one was talking about this. It's interesting how they can teach you everything around it but it's like this missing hole. I always felt like I could sense this missing hole but not know what was supposed to fill it. But the kids need to be outside and this is a piece that is missing and I wish it would have infiltrated my undergraduate so I didn't have to search it out afterward."*

*"You have to just teach it to undergraduates so that they figure out if it's what they want to and can do. They won't even know about it otherwise."*

## Recommendation 7: Clarify framing and terminology.

Whether the work is described as a “program” or an “initiative” is likely not so important for participating students. However, as program staff seek to solidify the institutional future of this work, further clarification of the institutional and operational integration of the various educational offerings and the way to clearly and consistently talk about them may be beneficial from a political and communications perspective. It may be time to revisit the creation of a logic model.

## Appendix A: Evaluation Plan

Antioch University New England, Nature-based Education Certificate program 2021 Evaluation Plan, v1c					3-19-21
Category	Evaluation Questions and/or Descriptions	Evaluation Strategy/Activity	Personnel Accountable	When	Approx. % of eval plan
<b>1. Planning</b>	* Who are the highest priority intended users, what decisions do they need to make? * What are realistic expectations and plans for generating useful results within existing resource constraints?	a) Finalize detailed Evaluation Plan	MD lead, ALP/AUNE support	Mar 2021	6%
<b>2. Survey</b>	* What are the current key features of alumni professional life? * How did the NbEC program contribute to alumni professional life?	b) Design alumni survey (n=50-70, online, discovery approach)	MD lead, ALP/AUNE support	Mar 2021	6%
		c) Administer alumni survey (target 70% response rate, incentives/multiple follow ups from AUNE)	AUNE lead, MD support	Apr 2021	2%
		d) Clean, organize, analyze alumni survey data	MD lead, ALP support	May 2021	13%
<b>3. Interviews</b>	* In what ways did the NbEC program contribute to outcomes beyond alumni personal experience? * How could the NbEC program improve? * In what ways does/does not the NbEC program advance equity?	e) Design interview guide and purposeful sample	ALP lead, MD/AUNE support	May 2021	6%
		f) Conduct alumni interviews/focus groups (n=6-10 sessions, 1-3 alumni per session, 30-60 min each, phone and/or video)	ALP lead, AUNE support scheduling	May - June 2021	12%
		g) Clean, organize, analyze alumni interview data	ALP lead, MD support	June 2021	15%
<b>4. Reporting</b>	* What did we learn?	h) Outline of Preliminary Findings report (informal format, internal use only)	ALP lead, MD/AUNE support	June 2021	15%
	* What does it mean?	i) Meaning making conversation (2 hr, video, finalize analysis and intended use)	ALP lead, MD/AUNE support	June 2021	6%
	* Who do we want to do what with the results?	j) Final Report (strong graphic treatment, for public dissemination)	MD lead, QR/ALP support	June 20 2021 goal, likely later	12%
<b>5. Other</b>	* What are realistic expectations and plans for future evaluation work within existing resource constraints?	k) Development and ongoing refinement of evaluation plans	MD lead, ALP/AUNE support	June 2021	4%
	* How can we maximize product quality via review from the PEER team?	l) Internal review and input from PEER team at key junctures in the project cycle	AAP	June 2021	4%
	* How has the intended use of evaluation data and products compared to actual and anticipated use?	m) Plan for and conduct project follow-up conversation. No charge.	AAP	Fall 2021	0%
					100%

# Appendix B: Survey

THANK YOU! Your candid responses will help improve Antioch University New England's Nature-based Early Childhood program. This survey should take you no more than 10-15 minutes to complete. Everyone who completes this survey will be sent a small thank you gift and entered into a drawing to receive 1 of 4 books by Antioch faculty.		Identifying Variables		Analyses and Notes
Variable(s)	Item Stem	Response		
CONTACT	The contact and work-related information you offer in these initial questions will be shared with Antioch personnel in order to help them keep current with you and your nature-based early childhood work. Your responses to the remaining questions about your opinions and experiences will be confidential.			
	Name	What is your name?	single textbox	- make required - this is the unique ID variable
	Email	What email address is best for Antioch to keep on file for you?	single textbox	- make required - sample frame n = 50-70
	Phone	What phone number is best for Antioch to keep on file for you?	single textbox	- response rate (target 70%)
	Snail Mail	To what snail mail address should Antioch send your small thank you gift?	single textbox	- make optional
CURRENT WORK	Workplace	What is the name of the school, program, or organization where you currently work?	single textbox	
	Org Location	In what state or province is your workplace located?	pull down menu: states, provinces, other (please explain)	
	Org Type	Which of the following best describes your workplace?	list (check all that apply): Public Preschool, Independent/Private Preschool, Public Elementary School, Independent/Private Elementary School, Licensed Early Learning & Childcare Center, Home-based Early Learning & Childcare Program, Forest Kindergarten, Nature Preschool, Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	- descriptive, rank ordered by response scale
	Role	What is/are your main role/s?	list (check all that apply): Lead/Classroom Teacher, Paraeducator, Assistant Teacher, Special Educator, Administrator, Environmental Educator, Parent, Program Founder, Consultant, Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	- qualitative comparison to and/or cross-tab with IVs and DVs
	Enrollment	Approximately how many children are enrolled in your program?	single textbox	- in order to accommodate the full range of ways to think and talk about program reach in terms of number of children served, calculations and summations of the Enrollment and Frequency variable will have to be manually reviewed to create numeric values
	Frequency	How frequently does your program meet (e.g. number of days, hours/day)?	single textbox	
	Geography	In which type of community do the children you work with live?	pull down menu: mostly urban, mostly suburban, mostly rural, combination, other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	
SES	Which socio-economic status (SES) distinction best describes the children with whom you work?		pull down menu: mostly high SES, mostly middle SES, mostly low SES, combination, other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	

Independent Variables (predictor variable)				
Independent variable - A variable thought to be the cause of some effect, usually used to denote a variable that is manipulated by the researcher; inputs or causes. Predictor variable - a variable thought to predict an outcome variable.				
Learning Source	Variable(s)	Item Stem(s)	Response	Analyses, Notes, Questions
AUNE CONTENT		The following questions are designed to help Antioch understand what factors had the most and least influence on your nature-based early childhood work. Only the evaluators, not Antioch personnel, will be able to connect your responses to your name. Your responses may be quoted in reports, but never in a way that allows you to be personally identified.		
	Coursework	Which of the following best describes the Antioch coursework you have completed?	pull down menu: Nature-based Early Childhood Certificate, Experienced Educators Master's Degree with Nature-based Early Childhood Concentration, Experienced Educators Master's Degree with Self-Designed Concentration, Integrated Learning Master's Degree and Nature-based Early Childhood Certificate, Integrated Learning Master's Degree with some Nature-based Early Childhood coursework; Some Nature-based Early Childhood coursework; Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	- descriptive, rank order by response scale - compare DVs by AUNE Content variables
	Conferences	How many, if any, in Bloom conferences have you attended?	pull down menu: 0, 1, 2-4, 5-7, 8 or more, N/A or Unsure	
	Other AUNE Learning	Which, if any, other Antioch-sponsored professional development or support with nature-based education have you accessed?	list (check all that apply): Nature-based Early Childhood Fellowship, Inside-Outside network membership, Webinars, Consultations, Film viewings, David Sobel Scholarship; Publications, Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	
AUNE PROCESS	Best Program Elements	What were the two or three <b>most helpful</b> experiences you had at (or through) any aspect of your Antioch nature-based early childhood work? What made them powerful?	open-ended	
	Improvements	If you could <b>change or improve</b> two or three things about any aspect of Antioch's nature-based early childhood work, what would they be? Why? (Critical or "negative" feedback is super helpful!)	open-ended	
	Competitors Which	Which, if any, other nature-based early childhood programs did you consider?	list (check all that apply): Prescott College Summer Institute, ERAFANS, Cedarsong, Tinkergarten, Forest School Teacher Institute, Trackers Forest School, Forest School Canada, Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	- QDA for themes
	Competitors Why	If applicable, why did you choose Antioch over those others?	open-ended	
NON-AUNE	Experience	What NON-Antioch work or life experiences have had the greatest influence on your nature-based early childhood work? What is most special about those experiences?		
	Degree Level	What is the highest level of schoolwork you completed prior to enrolling at Antioch?	pull down menu: High School, Undergraduate, Master's, Doctorate, Other (please explain), N/A or Unsure	- descriptive, rank order by response scale
	Degree Major	What was your major or area of study for that prior schoolwork?	single textbox	



Dependent Variables (outcome variable)			
<i>Dependent variable - a variable thought to be affected by changes in an independent variable; often thought of as an outcome, output, effect. Outcome variable - a variable thought to change as a function of changes in a predictor variable.</i>			
Outcome Domain	Variable(s)	Item Stem	Response
EDUCATOR PRACTICE		Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements, from 0 = Not at all to 10 = Totally! The items on this page are designed to measure how much or little Antioch has contributed to your nature-based early childhood work. The more candid (even critical!) you are, the more helpful your responses will be. Only the evaluators, not Antioch personnel, will be able to connect your responses to your name. Your responses may be quoted in reports, but never in a way that allows you to be personally identified.	
	Expertise	I have the professional skills and practical knowledge necessary to be an excellent nature-based early childhood educator	
		I attribute that expertise to Antioch	
	Satisfaction	I feel personally satisfied being a nature-based early childhood educator	
		I attribute that satisfaction to Antioch	
	Connectedness	I feel connected to and supported by a broader community of nature-based early childhood educators	
		I attribute that feeling of connectedness to Antioch	
	Leadership	I am a leader in the field of nature-based early childhood education	
		I attribute that leadership to Antioch	
	Equity	I apply an equity and justice lens to my nature-based early childhood work	
		I attribute that equity and justice practice to Antioch	
BROADER EFFECTS	Child Level	I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on CHILDREN	
		I attribute those child level effects to Antioch	
	Org Level	I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on MY SCHOOL, PROGRAM, AND/OR ORGANIZATION	
		I attribute those organization level effects to Antioch	
SUMMARY	Community Level	I see powerful, consistent, positive effects of my nature-based early childhood work on THE BROADER COMMUNITY	
		I attribute those community level effects to Antioch	
	Best Outcome	What is the most important way that Antioch contributed to your nature-based early childhood work? If you can provide one or more specific examples, that would be great.	Open-ended
	Anything Else	What else would you like share? What did we miss? Any summary thoughts?	Open-ended
		THANK YOU AGAIN! Your answers will really help Antioch create the best possible support for Nature-based Early Childhood education! In the next several weeks we will be reaching out to a few alumni to have more detailed conversations about their experiences and opinions. Thanks in advance to all of you who will consider accepting an invitation to be interviewed.	

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### Introduction

- *THANK YOU!*
- *I am an outside evaluator with PEER Associates, hired by Antioch University New England's Nature-based Early Childhood program to help them understand the effects of the initiative and how to continue refining its offerings. The interview process is a chance to go into greater depth and hear more specific stories and bits of feedback.*
- *The main purposes are*
  - o *to understand any ways in which **you were impacted** by your participation in various aspects of the nature-based program at Antioch*
  - o *to gather your insights about possible ways to **strengthen and improve** the program*
- *For focus groups (2 or 3), everyone is welcome to chime in at any time, and everyone does not need to respond to every topic. Do try to balance air time and hold space for quieter voices. Overall, think of this as a conversation. It's good to feed off each other.*
- *Data from interviews will be analyzed for patterns and themes and written up in a report.*
- *We appreciate your candor—know that we will not identify people by name when referencing quotes or comments in any reports or communications with staff.*
- *Request **permission to record**, take notes, transcribe.*
- *Questions or concerns?*

*First, a few questions so that I have a sense of who you are and what your connection with Antioch is.*

1. *What is **your professional role** and where do you work?*
2. *\*What types of involvement have you had with AUNE's NbEC initiative? (e.g., Nature-based Early Childhood Certificate, Experienced Educators Master's Degree with Nature-based Early Childhood Concentration or Self-Designed Concentration; some coursework; Fellowship, Inside-Outside network membership, Webinars, Consultations, Film viewings)*

### Motivations

3. *Were you fairly well-steeped in nature-based play and learning when you started your pursuits with Antioch, or was this a new step for you?*
4. *We asked this on the survey, but wanted to talk in a bit more depth about why you chose Antioch and (aspects above) and what other options you may have had—including not doing anything. So I'm interested in your motivations toward Antioch. A blunt way to say it might be, why bother to pay for a program or course if you were already doing the work?*

### Outcomes

5. *What were the **biggest changes to your practice** you made during or following the Antioch experience? Specific stories or illustrations are appreciated to help me understand those types of effects.*
6. *\*Can you identify what aspects of the Antioch work most inspired **those particular changes**?*
7. *What changes in practice, profession, personal motivations, etc. did you see **in your colleagues**? Any stories of impact stand out to you?*

## Program Feedback

8. We're interested in your candid feedback. I'm wondering if you experienced any particular challenges or hindrances while you were participating in any Antioch experiences.
9. We'd like your insider's input on **what you might add, change, or improve about the Antioch experience**, in hindsight.
10. Prompts about specific elements:
  - a. **Networking:** One of the most frequent and enthusiastic themes in the survey was the value of connecting with other like-minded folks. What could/should Antioch's role be in connecting nature-based educators, either within or beyond Antioch's programs? What ideas do you have about ways Antioch could/should strengthen networking opportunities? When it comes to networking, would it be better for Antioch to invest more in supporting personal connections or professional connections/resources?
  - b. **Risk course:** Many people mentioned Anne Stires' Risk course as especially valuable. Why do you think that is? What specific things made that course valuable? What aspects from that course could/should be transferred to other parts of Antioch's programming?
  - c. **Equity:** Early childhood interacting with the broader issues of equity and inclusion; how could Antioch become stronger in that?
  - d. **Virtual and distance learning:** How is Antioch doing balancing virtual and in person formats for teaching and learning this material?
  - e. **Hearts and minds:** Thinking about what you have taken away from your experience with Antioch's NbEC programming, what percentage of that value would you put in the "heart" category (e.g. confidence, inspiration, relationships), and what percentage would you put in the "mind" category (e.g. skills, tools, knowledge, resources)? What could/should Antioch do to strengthen either of those categories?
  - f. **Formative childhood experiences:** Most of the participants in Antioch's NbEC programming were strongly influenced to do this work by having had their own positive experiences in nature when they were young. Should Antioch focus more on reaching people who did or did not have strong nature connections in their own childhood? Why? How?
  - g. **Faculty:** A lot of people have been drawn to Antioch's NbEC programming by the reputation and work of particular faculty. Five, ten, or twenty years from now, do you imagine the reputation or popularity of the field of NbEC being more driven by individual personalities or by institutional practices?
11. **Anything else** you'd like to share with me, either about the effects this program had on you personally or professionally, or about the program itself?

**THANK YOU!**

## Appendix D: Interview Request Template

Greetings, (name),

As you're likely aware, Antioch's Nature-based Early Childhood initiative is in the process of hearing the perspectives and stories of participants through a survey and interview process. They're working with me at [PEER Associates](https://www.peerassociates.net) and you were selected as part of a small sample of program participants with whom we'd like to dive a bit deeper--beyond the survey into a more detailed conversation.

**I wonder if you would be willing to speak with me for 30-60 minutes in the next week or two, via Zoom.** If so, I'd appreciate you sending me a few times that you're available. My schedule is quite flexible and time slots are available morning, daytime, or evening, depending on what works best for you. (Ideally, the interviews will be with two or three past participants at a time to promote dialogue and connections, but if you're more comfortable one-on-one, that's fine too. Just let me know.)

I want to remind you that all of your responses to the survey and interview are held confidentially--PEER is an external evaluator and will report the findings to Antioch without using names or identifying details. For their part, Antioch faculty are excited to get constructive feedback so that they can continue to refine the program, as well as hear your stories.

Many thanks for considering offering the gift of your time and insights.

Warm wishes, and happy summer!

Amy Powers

PEER Associates

## Appendix E: Additional Quotes From Interviews

The following quotes hail from interviews, and provide additional support of the findings and recommendations in the main body of the report.

General, Overall, Appreciation, Miscellaneous
<i>"When I was handed the opportunity to develop an early childhood program from scratch, it was a gift. So then, in turn, I wanted to deepen my learning and discovered Antioch. I still look back and I can't believe I was able to do that program, it was incredible and it has made me an incredibly strong educator. I am confident and I go to work every day just loving my work and it's because I have the skills. I have the support network. And I attribute a ton of that to the Antioch program."</i>
<i>"Understanding how pedagogy and ecology are connected--Antioch helped me paint that big picture. It was not just one thing--it was incredible professors, really small classes, and a really small group of people that became not only friends but also like a true cohort of learners. So that community was really important."</i>
<i>"Antioch for me has been a great source of just continuing to grow as a teacher of teachers."</i>
<i>"By participating in this [interview], I guess I am really realizing what I want my nature-based program to look like. it's just made me really realize what is important to me on a personal level, and how I've been able to better serve children and define my own approach and values."</i>
<i>"As soon as I started doing my [AUNE] program I started doing a forest morning outside at my school, a half-day every Friday outside."</i>
<i>"There's such a strong need for [nature-based early childhood education] that parents in our society feel, for their children to just spend more time outside."</i>
<i>"Sometimes you feel like you wish you could just go to school forever. Yeah, you know, it was a really positive experience. And that's why I love the in bloom because you feel like you're kind of still getting all that."</i>
<i>"Originally I started taking kids out because I had so many restless boys who needed to move. That saved my sanity. But it morphed into something bigger. We found a spot in the woods, called it our village, and that's where we did a lot of our lessons. Then I discovered Inside-Outside workshops and the In Bloom [conferences], and they were very good and helpful and I was able to do the lessons immediately."</i>
<i>"This 'point and name' type environmental education that I'd always done, it never felt right, but I didn't have the language to explain why. After hearing [Antioch faculty] talk about that so many times it was just so solidifying. I really got this idea that you don't need to explicitly teach everything, but some things are just experiential. Just let kids touch and experience things. That balance for me has been really important. Because there are times when you examine things closely, we do that. But also we need to have this time when you're just falling in love with the woods. We're here to develop a sense of place, a sense of community appreciation. Noticing."</i>

*"I think I realized, like, I'm more capable than I give myself credit for and the people that are doing this kind of thing, they're learning too and it's just kind of you learn as you go. So that's given me a lot of confidence."*

*"One kindergarten teacher described a spread of effect to a coworker who was "not an outdoors person, and didn't take the preschoolers outside at all" but after seeing the AUNE participant taking students outdoors for learning, "she has taken the kids outside and spent hours with them outside. She has gone out of her comfort zone, because she sees the benefits. She didn't like bugs, she was a city girl. But now she puts on her boots and she goes out there to the [Outdoor Classroom] Village."*

*"I think In Bloom caters to exactly what we're doing. You are around such like-minded people who are doing, or who want to do, what you're doing--we all want to do this. There's almost this spiritual connection there because it's not just a class, but it's nature, and you're together, and it just makes it much more spectacular."*

*"I went and drove to Muncie and went to see these teachers. And it was funny, because they were like, 'You went to Antioch! I read about Antioch online. I've been wanting to do their certificate, their program. I can't believe you went!' It was like I was some superstar. It was kind of funny. But it really, really gave me a confidence boost. But I realized, they're alone. I mean, they're like the only teacher in the YMCA that has this classroom that's doing this this way. They don't have very much experience, but they're trying, but there are individuals out there that see the importance of nature-based stuff and it's like, they don't know each other and they're there."*

## Networking

*"[Networking] was one of the big takeaways from Antioch. Being in person, immersed, and being around people that are really committed to this type of work, it was very empowering."*

*"Professionally, it's just been an amazing resource for me in terms of knowing people and connections, and when applying for jobs"*

*"I have jumped on a few of those Inside-Outside network resources they've created and I have to say kudos to them for developing that network, keep doing that."*

*"Instead of saying, 'Why don't you start a Michigan chapter of Inside-Outside, [Antioch staff person] will say, 'Here's a Michigan group you can connect with.'"*

*"I have my cohort that I can lean on for whatever I need, so the program was fantastic and the connections I've formed I've held onto."*

*"There were wonderful gatherings aimed at building community. They always did some sort of dinner during our week together, where we all came together and had tacos or whatever at [a professor's] house. There was usually an outdoor activity like fort building or knot tying and then enjoy a meal together or review a film. It was building a support network, and bonding."*

*"[During our classes] there was usually some sort of wrapping us around, you know, like, 'We know you're out there doing this work often quite isolated, but know that we're here for you. And you can come channel back to this if times get tough.' We were connecting into the idea that this is a movement and we're a part of it. And we're all trying to work towards this shared thing that's bigger than any one of us individually."*

<i>"Even though it's just summers, I think we learned a lot from each other as a cohort."</i>
<i>"I have to say, my entire master's program [with another institution] was online and in those exchanges we had wonderful dialogue but most of it was in written format, and not a lot of face-to-face interaction. And you know what? I can't tell you the name of any of my peers, you know, after two years of studying there, I cannot. But when it comes to Antioch's program, I can rattle off 20 people in the next two minutes that I have in my network across the country."</i>
<b>Program Logistics, Structure, Curriculum, Classes, Faculty</b>
<i>"[Completing the Antioch certificate] also was a marketing tool for us, when prospective parents started to come. We were able to use the flow of the day from the curriculum class, and say, 'Here's a picture of your child, and they're playing, but here's all the early childhood frameworks that we're meeting.' So I had a lot more, I would say, legitimacy behind what we were doing."</i>
<i>"Thinking back to my master's degree, some programs are really theory based, and then you're not getting a lot of the practical. Antioch (certificate program) was more practical, or at least had a nice balance [of theory and practice]."</i>
<i>"They allowed me to take my own organizational program and put it through the lens of everything we were studying."</i>
<i>"That's why [the Risk Management] class was so awesome, is because you didn't talk about it. You did it. You were there. You saw the kids on a daily basis, and for a full week. That's what people need--hands-on practical ways to make it happen, being outside, because then they'll feel more confident in what to do."</i>
<i>"Helped me think through it from an insurance perspective, and I also created a letter for parents to help them understand our philosophy on risk. And so yeah, I use a ton of stuff from that class."</i>
<i>"One of the strong teachings that came through was understanding your values. Sometimes you're caught in a place where no one around you necessarily gets it and so you have to advocate for it. Understanding your values, what really matters, is core to making decisions. As an example, last year I was asked to help develop some kindergarten programming and it was going to be virtual and I don't necessarily agree with the direction or the push. So I checked back in with my values and actually connected back with the instructor of the business course. So I think that [Antioch's courses] impart some of that, like, core knowledge that gives you confidence."</i>
<i>"I got from the curriculum class a real reinforcement of things that I was already doing, and that was important. It was the unstructured planning and, you know, teachers as observers. Asking, 'How can I step back and observe the children more?'"</i>
<i>"The place based-ed class]...reinforced what I was already doing but helped me present things in a place-based context, forcing me to really question how I could tweak the other studies that we were doing so they are more place-based, so they'd feel more authentic for the kids because it was applied to our city context."</i>
<i>"[Teaching in Winter class offered] amazing tools for tackling outdoor teaching in all weather. We focused on students with sensory issues, cold tolerance. That course helped focus on how to support a child like that."</i>



*"As a NYC public school teacher, I just wanted additional ways to tie this nature-based work to the classroom, and what are some activities, practical stuff I can do outside of the classroom. So the outdoor classes were really important."*

*"I think that that independent time wouldn't have been as useful if I hadn't had the summers to saturate me with ideas."*

*"Like the hunting and gathering, I see the kids doing it all the time and I hear [this faculty member's] voice in my head alerting me to how self-directed kids' best learning can be."*

*"I don't like virtual myself, but my colleague did a virtual thing with David from England...and she thought it was fantastic."*

## Equity

*"Equity and inclusion was addressed in classes, especially philosophy of education. In my literacy class with Jane Miller we talked about it. I think Antioch does it but it's not clear that it's a huge focus."*

*"There were some suggestions made about bringing elements of nature inside and using the spaces on the playground or surrounding area as inspiration, but I would love to see a greater depth of exploration into how the many educators in urban settings could bring the power of nature education creatively into their learning spaces. I'd love to see practical examples and suggestions for this. The learning engagements explored in the forest were so deep and rich and it made me sad that my students don't have access to those spaces."*

*"ANE is really really trying, and getting better."*

## Challenges

*"In Bloom, you really are there with your people. And then in the classes, it felt a little more disjointed because there's people who have all different potential outcomes and agendas and stuff."*

*"I think one thing that many of us have realized in the last year [with the pandemic enforcing virtual learning] is there's no substitute for in person. Especially with the nature-based program."*

*"I guess with the grading system, you don't necessarily know where you're going, like what their expectations are in terms of grading. But it fit my learning style at that point so I didn't have a problem with it."*

*"It would have been nice to collaborate more in different environments, you know, with different directors with different teachers and different places around New England"*

## Appendix F: All Open-Ended Survey Responses

This [spreadsheet](#) contains over 400 de-identified responses to open-ended items about the best program elements, ideas for program improvement, reasons for choosing Antioch, other non-Antioch experiences, best personal outcomes, and anything else to share. The reason these data are provided here is to support the primary intended use of program revision by core program staff. Readers interested in accessing this spreadsheet will need to get permission from Antioch staff.