



What the Judges Are Saying...

In reviewing over 120 applications, the judging panel for the first submissions to the UL Innovative Education Award saw great diversity in approaches to using Environment as a pathway to STEM learning. These submissions showed tremendous geographical range, representing 32 states in the United States and three Canadian provinces. The quality, sophistication, and passion in these programs put a spotlight on the innovation in Environmental Education (EE) today. It was clear to the panel that EE is pushing boundaries and pioneering new strategies for engagement more than ever before. Judges, impressed and energized by the crop of competitive applications, showed appreciation for the most notable trends in how educators are using the Environment as a path to STEM learning for youth across North America.

Storytelling with Media.

The panel appreciated the skillful and innovative ways in which programs told the story of their impacts through video. Media that showcased young people's authentic and observable learning most meaningfully conveyed the program's strategy and outcomes in STEM engagement. These videos richly illustrated the actual activities, what the kids do during the program, and their effects on the community. The panel believed that the value of the video extended beyond their applications for this particular award. In the big picture, the organizations that are able to simply and honestly tell their story are well positioned to advance their message and work with greater numbers of the public, no matter the size of the program and budget.

Self-directed Experiential Learning.

The panel commended the applicants for the high quality of experiential learning strategies. These efforts take learning beyond the tried and true method of giving youth hands-on activities to do in nature. The most innovative programs use different types of environments – including built and natural areas – as a tool for scientifically studying an issue. This work challenges youth to take the next step by following through with solutions for the environmental problems they study. In the most compelling cases, youth direct their own projects by identifying issues that matter to them and carrying out solutions in their own communities or neighborhoods.

Meaningful Partnerships.

The number and scope of the applicants' partnerships with like-minded organizations impressed the panel. The most successful partnerships were synergistic, benefitting both organizations and helping advance STEM learning for young people. Partners brought skills, expertise, connections, and opportunities to programs in ways that environmental educators could not do alone. These relationships were not seen as add-ons or extras. Instead, they are integral to the ways that STEM programming engages youth in hands-on learning, gives them access to professionals and experts, and helps them develop identities as scientists. Judges believed that, for many organizations, this relationship-based model is having novel impacts on the way they do their work.



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Intergenerational Learning.

While all programs focused on youth between the ages of 5 and 18, the panel commended programs that bridged generations through joint learning activities. These programs offered not only a way to deeply engage in STEM learning, but also had the added benefit of a sort of cultural sharing between people of different ages. This program design may improve the all-important twenty-first century skill of communication.