

HOW FUNDERS AND EVALUATORS SHAPE PRAIRIE PROGRAMS: THE CASE OF 30-PLUS YEARS OF THE LOESS HILLS PRAIRIE SEMINAR IN IOWA

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Abstract: Funders and program evaluators influence the shape and size of programs of all types, including programs focused on prairies. A question readily emerges: Do we like what we see? This paper provides an analysis of pathways taken by organizers of the longstanding Loess Hills Prairie Seminar (LHPS) – held annually in spring in the Hills in western Iowa for over 30 years. While undoubtedly configured to save and to savor prairie, LHPS serves some needs and not others. In large part, partnerships with longstanding funders and, more recently, program evaluation and assessment processes, have led organizers to feature and fine-tune avenues such as teacher education, in-field orientation experiences for early career naturalists, and updates of flora and fauna inventories. Primary funding and evaluation entities include the Western Hills Area Education Association #12; Iowa’s REAP Conservation Education Program, and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, among others. Presenters have been involved in LHPS program planning, program evaluation, direct instruction, or all three. Survey instruments, data, and results of outcomes evaluation studies of LHPS will be shared. Session participants will be invited to discuss whether the “shape” of the LHPS, as influenced by external partners, contributes in solidarity with aims of other prairie programs to advance revival of prairie as part of Midwest landscapes. The larger challenge for program planners concerns developing habits of reflection and dialogue that encourage smart negotiation with current and potential funders and evaluators to move a prairie agenda forward with greater momentum.