

Current Issues at the NIA

Before facilitating an NIA meeting, it's a good idea to spend a few minutes reviewing the recent chatter on the [NIA Facebook Group](#), the NIA [Platform](#), and [Notes](#) from recent Branch Meetings. That said, it'd be a mistake to try to address all of these topics at a given meeting. Typically 2-3 suffice to get the conversation going.

Outline

- I. Three Themes for 2016
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 - B. Mentorship
 - C. Increased Ease of Field Travel Reimbursements
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Three Themes for 2016

These themes were picked intentionally, and an effort was made to balance pragmatism with an ambitious agenda of improvements. They are: faculty engagement in school-wide decision making processes, mentorship, and increased speed and ease of travel reimbursements for field courses.

Faculty Engagement. The NIA believes that as teaching faculty, instructors are the primary bearers of the NOLS mission through our direct work in the field with students. From this unique role at NOLS, working faculty have an essential perspective on decision-making and change at the school, and the NIA's goal is to further solidify and integrate this perspective in the work of the NOLS administration.

What we are advocating for:

- A Faculty Chair. This would be a half-time salaried-faculty (Sal-Fac) position for a working instructor (classroom, field, or crossover) who would work to gather the views of the school's 850 faculty and represent them to the executive director team. A version of this idea was written into the last Strategic Plan, but wasn't followed through due to lack of funding.
- The creation of a budget line to pay instructors for occasional participation on advisory committees, such as the Morehead Committee.
- The inclusion of folks who work primarily as instructors (classroom, field, or crossover) on Strategic Planning committees, such as the Excellent Student Experiences committee. We recognize that the irregular work schedule of instructors is a challenge, but believe that active faculty can make invaluable contributions to these discussions if invited to participate regularly. One way forward might be to create an online petition advocating for instructor inclusion in the strategic planning process.

What you can do:

- Be informed about the school! Read the Board Reports, Staff Newsletter, and Weekly Manager's' Notes.
- Attend EDT Forums and Board of Trustees Meetings.
- Participate in the debate on the NIA Facebook Group and website.

Mentorship. The NIA Mentorship Program was officially launched in May of 2015. Anyone can view and contact our mentors at <http://nolsinstructorassociation.org/Mentors>. A representative from the staffing office informed Instructor Course graduates this year about the mentorship program. The program is run on a volunteer basis to offer guidance not just for new instructors but also for people looking to move in other directions at the school or for help incorporating new career paths into their lives.

What you can do:

- Newer instructors: take advantage of the program, and connect with a mentor!
- Instructor with more than 100 weeks: volunteer to be a mentor.

Travel reimbursement. The NIA applauds recent increases in travel reimbursements for catalogue courses. However, Administrators, NOLS Pro instructors and WMI instructors still get a much better deal than catalogue course instructors. Many instructors we hear from think that NOLS should move towards full travel reimbursement for *all* courses. One objection to this is that instructors would be prioritized for work based on their homebase, and there would be fewer opportunities to travel. One possible solution would be to forgo the annual Gain Share in certain years in order to fund an endowment that could be used to subsidize international travel for excellent instructors. (The Gain Share, because it is proportional to one's annual income, is a

very unevenly applied benefit. For instance, 7.25% of John Gan's salary is much greater than 7.25% of an intern's stipend.)

What you can do:

- Fill out the NIA travel survey at <http://nolsinstructorassociation.org/Surveys> so we can track the full costs of travel and compare that with the reimbursements currently being offered.
- Always submit a Travel Expense Journal (TEJ) when you've traveled to a NOLS campus to work. Note the full amount you spent on travel, not just the maximum reimbursement allowed. NOLS Admin tracks the difference between these two figures. The greater it is, the more likely they are to allot more funds towards travel reimbursement.

Compensation & Job Security

Compensation refers to all of the financial benefits we receive in exchange for the work we do for NOLS. This includes not only pay in the form of daily teaching wages and annual salary for in-town staff, but also travel reimbursements, occasional annual gain shares, health benefits, and matching retirement funds. It's unlikely that compensation will ever cease to be a strategic issue for the NIA. However, we do make tactical choices in how we pursue improvements. We had real success on the pay front in the previous Strategic Plan (Expedition 2015), during which NOLS increased pay by more than 26%. Subsequently the opinion that the compensation "problem" has been "solved" has been heard from some quarters. Partially in response to this, the NIA has chosen to focus our compensation push in the near term on realizing a simpler and more generous travel reimbursement system. We think that today travel reimbursement, strategic underemployment, and job security are more pressing issues than per diem pay rates.

In-Town Pay. We still have a ways to go here, especially when one considers in-town positions below the Branch Director level. These are often filled by instructors when they need a break from the field. We are also concerned that low pay leads to turnover among Program Supervisors, which leads to a lack of consistency in how we are evaluated on our field work. We can't improve compensation unless NOLS prospers, and of course NOLS can't prosper without committed and experienced instructors. It's not staff vs. administration; we are all on the NOLS team and we prosper together or not at all.

Field Instructor Pay. Compensation increased by 3% for FY 2016. The NIA applauds the budgetary efforts that made this possible.

We see our role as helping to establish a long-term vision rather than a short-term demand for improving compensation. This vision would openly accept the role of compensation in educational excellence. With this in mind, the NIA calls for a stated long-term goal of a living wage for all employees and a middle-class income for senior faculty and staff, without reference to the low comparables in U.S. outdoor education.

Faculty would feel deeply valued and supported by the school's adopting an aggressive goal in this area, even if that goal may not be met for many years.

Field Instructor Job Security. Many instructors are more concerned with the number of days of work they get in a year than the number of dollars they make each day. There is no escaping the fact that outside of the summer peak, there are too many instructors and too few contracts. The marketing department works hard to increase off season (i.e. Semester) enrollment, but ultimately this number is out of our control as instructors. What the school can control is the size of the instructor pool.

What we are advocating for:

- A field instructor pool that grows less quickly (i.e. fewer ICs per year), but is mentored even more intentionally.
- The creation of six Semi-Annual Faculty Positions (SAFP). These positions would have fewer benefits than AFP (for instance no access to the NOLS Health Insurance plan), but would involve a mutual commitment to 12.5 weeks of work per year.

What you can do:

- Talk up these ideas, both with newer staff and with your supervisors.

The NIA Lifestyle Survey. The survey is available at <http://nolsinstructorassociation.org/Surveys>. It deals with matters of income, job security, living situations, and career reality. Our goal is for *all* working field instructors to fill it out during the course of 2016. The hope is that this will give us the data we need to advocate for significant changes on behalf of instructors in the next strategic plan.

The NIA & WMI

The membership of the NIA voted 86% to 14% in favor of including WMI Instructors as Members in Full during August 2014. The NIA WMI membership drive is on! Recruiting WMI instructors can be challenging, due in large part to the fact they they often don't visit NOLS campuses. We're encouraging Field Instructors to engage WMI Faculty in conversations about the NIA whenever they encounter them, and challenging WMI Instructors who are already members to recruit the folks they work with in the future.

A Consolidated System for Seniority. In recent years NOLS has struggled to build an adequate corps of crossover staff (WFR Instructors who can also teach field courses). Efforts are being made to recruit Field instructors to take the WMI ITC. The NIA believes that more can be done to encourage WMI instructors to take an IC or PIC. Specifically, we could move away from an antiquated system of "Field Weeks" to one of "Contract Teaching Weeks," which would recognize the hard work that these folks have already done to serve the NOLS mission. As long as an instructor who has taught dozens of

WMI courses has to enter the field pay scale with zero weeks, we are likely to continue to have problems staffing crossover courses.

Recent Successes

Proctorships. The NIA advocates for the staffing of proctors on all semesters with I-teams larger than two, and whenever possible on two person I-teams. We applaud the NOLS Administration and Board of Trustees for approving a budget in June of 2014 that includes a return to I-level wages for proctors to aid one section per semester. We believe that this NIA's efforts to keep this issue in the spotlight since 2008 were integral to this victory.

International Pay Scales. A major success for the NIA and for Indian, Chilean, and Brazilian faculty members was the Compensation Task Force's announcement of planned changes to international pay scales. The new system, of pay scales based on a conversion to local currency from the U.S. pay scale, to be set yearly based on the previous year's exchange-rate average (with the maintenance of higher pay scales in New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, and Canada for legal and competitiveness reasons) is virtually identical to the solution overwhelmingly supported by the international faculty affected. We worked hard to educate international faculty about the complex decision-making undertaken by the CTF and to mobilize faculty to offer consistent, well-reasoned ideas for a solution. Although we don't know exactly what role the NIA's or faculty members' input played in the CTF's decision-making process, we applaud their willingness to respond to faculty members' desires and to trust our ability to support this system over the long-term.

NIA Operations

It's important for us to educate the whole NOLS community about our internal operations. That having been said, this section is last for a reason. We need to keep the focus on NOLS, and ways that we can make the school even better than it already is, rather than on the NIA itself.

Membership. As of 2/11/16 our Facebook group had 626 members, many of whom likely believe their dues are current. We had 361 members registered on our website. 40 of these have purchased a Lifetime Membership. 85 of our members have signed up for our new Auto-renewal option. In addition to continuing to recruit new members, we need to focus on encouraging current members to migrate over to Auto-renewal. A strong core of automatically renewing members will allow the Board and Branch Reps to focus less on recruitment, and more on representation and advocacy. Our long range goal is 500 Automatically Renewing members. This will give us the credibility with the BoT and EDT, as well as the annual operating budget we need, to reach our full potential as an instructor advocacy organization.

Branch Representative Program. In order to support greater faculty engagement and to ensure that NOLS remains the leader in outdoor education, the NIA advocates for increasing workplace democracy through a network of volunteer Representatives at all NOLS campuses. The goals of a Branch Representative in fostering engagement are twofold:

1. Top down: raise awareness among the faculty and staff diaspora about current issues at the school.
2. Bottom up: take the pulse of the greater NOLS community and pass this feedback up the organizational hierarchy.

Web presence. After years of relying solely on a Facebook Group, we launched nolsinstructorassociation.org on May 1, 2014. We see both of these platforms as important ways to stay in touch with the NIA and for instructors to provide feedback and direction to the NIA Board. It's also a place to share ideas and articles about teaching, conservation and other issues that are important to us. Log on and speak up.