

# “A Very Good Job” - Careers at NOLS in the 21st Century

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The Case for a Living Wage



By The Board of Directors  
of the NOLS Instructor Association

*“Longer term, this year we wrap up our strategic plan. I am hearing discussions around lessons learned, what might be carried forward, and what new efforts we might make. In the coming months, we will begin framing our next plan process. I want to tackle substantive issues and set some audacious goals that challenge us to solve persistent and nagging problems.”*

- Terri Watson, NOLS President, email to all employees, January 20th, 2020

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## Introduction: NOLS in 2099

It is 2020, and NOLS is 55 years old.

Take a moment to imagine that NOLS is not a global institution, but instead an individual person. At NOLS' current age, we could proudly say that this person had enjoyed a brilliantly successful life and career, and could look forward to another twenty years of work, until a comfortable retirement around 2040, at age 75.

But NOLS is not a person. After half a century of operation, the life of an institution begins to look very different than that of a person, and the measures for success diverge. If an institution isn't to retire by 75, its successes will need to rest on deep foundations. It will need a vision that arcs deep into the future. The individuals who work within it will have changed several times over, and will continue to change. If the institution is to survive, it will have to depend, not just on a few motivated individuals, but on its values, structure, and organizational habits.

The NIA believes that NOLS needs to not just survive, but thrive, through the rest of the century and beyond. We believe NOLS' core mission and values are unique and essential, and will continue to be so for generations. We believe there is work to be done that no one else is doing but NOLS, and that the world will be a better place if NOLS continues to do this work. That is why we have taken the time to put together this paper.

Our premise is that to move forward into the medium and distant future, NOLS will need to take seriously the impacts of inadequate compensation, lack of job security, and a changing outdoor jobs market on its ability to continue to deliver excellent student outcomes. We will suggest concrete goals to ameliorate these adverse impacts. These goals are based on an analysis of internal NOLS data, data gathered by the NIA, and data that is available to the general American public. These goals are ambitious, and paint a picture of NOLS as an employer that is quite different from today's reality. In their aspiration, precision, and vision, these goals are very much like other major changes that we have made in the past: changes that have made NOLS a stronger and better school.

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## Change at NOLS: in the field and in the office

The world is changing fast. Some things that worked in 1965 might still work in 2099. Others might not. A core assumption of this paper is that the world will still need wilderness, it will still need grit, it will still need excellence, and so it will still need NOLS.

Yet NOLS has, over the past 55 years, identified other values that once worked, but later were no longer needed. It has replaced these with new ones more suited to the times. We no longer hunt game on courses, or send students on ISGE without food. NOLS took the time to develop a method for teaching leadership, rather than assuming it would always grow organically from an intense experience and a few debriefs. We no longer implicitly assume that instructors are off-duty when travel and classes are finished for the day. We now camp, cook, socialize, and live much more closely with our students than in the past, and give them very close to 100% of our time and energy during waking hours, often for a month or more at a time.

Looking beyond our own courses, NOLS now has an organized and committed engagement on issues of national importance. One of these is wilderness protection, for which it has full-time staff members engaging with lawmakers and activists at the state and federal level in multiple countries. Another is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Rather than taking only the minimum steps necessary to keep up with cultural expectations, NOLS has taken on its share of the challenge of bringing outdoor recreation and wilderness travel and ethics into the lives of *everyone* in the United States. It has committed to becoming more than just a privilege of mostly white, middle class males.

The long-term change at NOLS that is most relevant to the present report is in the school's financial life. Twenty years ago, it was normal that the only assets NOLS had in the bank were students' equipment deposits, some of which would inevitably be returned when students failed to spend as much money as expected in the issue room.<sup>1</sup> The goal of pursuing an endowment was considered debatable, and perhaps not even appropriate for NOLS. In 2018, the school surpassed \$100,000,000 in assets, and its endowment stood at almost \$45,000,000, with 46% growth over the preceding four years.<sup>2</sup> It routinely holds

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Buchanan, personal communication with Sean Williams, Faculty Summit 2012 presentation.

<sup>2</sup> Alumni and Development Section, October 2018 Board of Trustees Report.

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\$8-10 million in unrestricted cash in the bank, available for any purpose at any moment, and has established dedicated savings to replace major physical assets and to weather a downturn in business. Financially speaking, we are a long way from the old power plant and cabin in Sinks Canyon, which cost \$1/year in rent and was NOLS' entire footprint from 1965-69.<sup>3</sup>

These are major changes. Simply put, NOLS is a more solid and responsible organization than it used to be, and a much larger one, with a national, and even global, impact. NOLS has put its financial house in order, and is taking on greater issues in the world at large. These are issues that do not affect the school's existence from one year to the next, but that may affect our existence later in the century.

Indeed, the commitments to financial stability and to diversity, equity, and inclusion mentioned above are examples of ways in which NOLS is now thinking very long-term. In working rigorously to establish long-term financial stability, and in committing ourselves to long-term national change in a manner that is both ethical and practical, NOLS is working towards the distant future: thinking about where we will be, and how we will be needed, in 2099. Clearly, NOLS does not intend to retire at age 75.

With admiration and support for the long-term thinking of NOLS' leadership to date, we believe that NOLS must take a similarly bold and forward-looking approach to providing stable and gainful employment. What follows is a suggestion for a set of priorities regarding NOLS faculty members and in-town staff, to be submitted for consideration for the next Strategic Plan. We consider these recommendations critical for NOLS' continued success into the twenty-first century. The priorities we are suggesting, and the shift in practice that they may require, are perhaps comparable to the changes in NOLS' financial life, and in our school's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They could be just as difficult, and take as long to accomplish. Indeed, we believe that NOLS may not last long without them.

The NIA's highest concern is for student experiences, and thus for NOLS' continued ability to deliver and improve on these. The perspective through which we have approached this concern to date is fundamentally a faculty perspective. We are best informed about the realities of instructors' work in the field and in the classroom, and about changes in their

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Dernocoeur, *A Worthy Expedition: The History of NOLS*, pg. 29

careers and life outside of NOLS. We have also worked to become better informed about other perspectives within NOLS, including the needs of in-town staff, and the financial and strategic priorities of NOLS' leadership. It is safe to say that the authors and editors of this report understand much more about NOLS' operational and strategic decisions than the average instructor. Yet a deep knowledge of NOLS as an organization is not our professional task, nor is strategic planning our primary role at NOLS.

What follows, then, are suggestions from a thoughtful and respectful perspective, submitted with the greatest sense of goodwill regarding the commitment of the school's leadership to NOLS' long-term success, both as an institution and as a community.

## Past successes: financial stability & social responsibility



Source: NOLS Board of Trustees Report, February 2018, page 72

We at the NIA are certainly not Wall Street analysts, but we can read a simple graph. From what we see, the school's financial consolidation and establishment of real security and serious financial rigor are impressive. Considering only the past twenty years, the chart above shows that there were periods in the early 2000s where the school's net cash on

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hand was very close to zero, and where NOLS was most often not meeting its goals for operating reserves. The last point near zero shown here was in 2003, and the last point below the designated goal was in 2006.

Over the past 12 years, NOLS has consistently met its goal of keeping money in the bank. There is no doubt that this was through careful budgeting and expense management. Faculty and in-town staff who were not directly aware of the long-term goal of making NOLS a financially stable and mature operation often complained about these decisions in the moment. Wishes for NOLS to spend money more freely, to pay more, buy better gear, improve facilities, and support money-losing courses and branches, were frequently expressed. Yet the longer viewpoint shown in this chart shows enormous successes. Presumably because of goals set in the 1990s or early 2000s, NOLS spent 2006-2018 expanding its business model with the addition of NOLS Custom Education and NOLS Wilderness Medicine, and rapidly growing its endowment, rather than just living from paycheck to paycheck.

Notably for faculty, the school was in a position to respond positively to a staffing crisis in the summer of 2007 by committing to long-overdue raises in field staff compensation, totalling 28% over a three-year period. In 2008, 2009, and 2010, while the rest of the country was reeling from the Great Recession, NOLS instructors were enjoying raises of 10%, 10%, and 6%. We understand that the ability to make these changes was contingent on careful budgeting and responsible financial habits, started years beforehand. Conceivably, NOLS might not have even survived the Great Recession had the school not previously set a goal of building rigorous and conservative financial habits, and set aside reserves to weather a storm.

It is a measure of NOLS' age and organizational maturity that previous financial changes predate the tenure of many of us at the NIA today. The NOLS history book, and a few anecdotal references, tell us that some of these changes began in the 1990s, on the impetus of then Board Chair Gene Tremblay, among others. It was in the 1990s that genuine professional business skills began to be applied at NOLS Headquarters, that the Annual Fund was established and the first efforts at soliciting donations were made, and that NOLS decided that it was okay to try to make a "profit," rather than spend every cent of income every year, in order to save money for a rainy day and to invest in growth. This

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earlier period of financial learning also came with conflict and emotional costs among staff members, who had a hard time squaring such ideas with the bare-bones wilderness school and tight-knit community that they were used to.<sup>4</sup>

As we understand it today, the outcome of these debates was that NOLS committed to more professional financial management, which included financial stability, large cash and investment reserves, and “profit” to fund growth as key strategic priorities. The school we are part of today is the fruit of that commitment.

NOLS’ endowment, at \$55 million in February 2020, and total assets, now over \$114 million, are similar pictures of success. We recognize that NOLS’ success in the 21st century depends on maintaining and consolidating these strengths.

## **A role to play outside the wilderness**

We see a similar picture of success in NOLS’ commitments to be a responsible part of the country and the world, beyond the narrowly-conceived boundaries of leadership in wilderness education. The school’s political engagement on the protection of wilderness is an admirable product of long-term vision. It doesn’t produce any revenue, and it creates expenses in salaries, travel, and publications, but it is evidence of an active and committed role in helping the nation maintain the spaces that we need to operate as an institution. It is also fundamentally ethical. It demonstrates NOLS’ commitment to doing more than just using the wild places we depend on as a suitable backdrop for leadership training and grit-building experiences.

Similarly, our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion goes beyond a catchphrase. At the time of this writing, a powerful debate is taking place within NOLS about the very meaning of these phrases, their impact on the school’s goals and decisions, and the systems and habits of inclusion and exclusion they point to. The right answers here will be a question for history. The point for us is that NOLS is *engaged in change*—committing resources, both financial and emotional, to taking on some of the most significant issues that face the nation. As with our commitment to protecting wild places, this engagement, while it may bring us practical advantages in the long run, such as relevance to a changing

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Dernocoeur, *A Worthy Expedition*, Pgs. 220-227.

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demographic, different business models and publics, etc., goes beyond the practical, and goes beyond just getting students on the bus for the next course. It goes beyond the budget goals for next year, and beyond the rest of Vision 2020, the Strategic Plan in which it was established as a top priority.

Somewhere in the midst of this debate, however, lies the basic observation that NOLS' commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, whatever its outcomes, is itself an example of ethical leadership for the 21st century. If NOLS was focused only on surviving into the next year, such a commitment, and the resources needed to make it, would be unlikely to be made. NOLS, however, is in a position to put real energy into goals beyond just getting students on the bus and into the field tomorrow.

## **Present reality: the lives of NOLS faculty and staff**

NOLS is no longer Paul Petzoldt's wild dream, struggling to get off the ground, and out of the Lumberyard in Lander. Indeed, it is no longer struggling at all, in the sense that it is no longer threatened with closure the moment revenue goes down or expenses go up. Yet almost all faculty members, and many in-town staff, work with no guarantee of even short-term future employment. Indeed, as an "at will" employer, NOLS has absolutely no obligation to honor its "contracts" with faculty. The first line of a faculty Work Agreement reads: "I understand that NOLS may terminate this agreement and my employment at any time, without notice, for any reason." The negative impact this has on faculty morale cannot be overstated. When faculty do work, it is at a daily rate significantly below the industry median, and almost exclusively on an irregular basis that has no hope of providing an adequate yearly income on its own.

From our perspective, throughout the organization, and, at most pay levels and in every country, NOLS' lack of a commitment to realistically provide a sustainable career has not fundamentally changed since the earliest days. Metaphorically speaking, for almost all employees, we're still at the Pumphouse in Sinks Canyon.

We at the NIA believe that it is time to move beyond the implicit notion that, because NOLS work can be engaging and fun, wages do not need to reach a level that would support a professional adult in the United States. This is an assumption that we at the NIA have heard stated explicitly, on multiple occasions, from Director- and Executive Team-level NOLS

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employees, as well as from Trustees. More broadly, the cultural norm for NOLS faculty and for most in-town staff is that *NOLS, as a mission-driven non-profit with a permanently tenuous financial situation, cannot be expected to provide a sustainable income for the vast majority of NOLS instructors, or for in-town staff who work seasonally or at entry-level jobs.* In the days when Paul Petzoldt was literally inventing wilderness education as a professional field, or for decades afterward, when NOLS had not developed the organizational maturity to manage its finances with the long-term future in mind, such an assumption worked well, and was probably necessary. NOLS flourished with this assumption, but now NOLS has matured. Its ability, and thus its responsibility as a business, to provide *a living wage* to its employees, has changed.

Working as a NOLS faculty member, in the classroom or especially in the field, is, no doubt, an unusual job. It is full of brilliant rewards, carries an odd sort of glamour in certain circles, includes days or weeks of what, to most people, would be unimaginable hard work, and other days of what some people do on their vacations. It is almost always life-changing, in large ways or small. Often it is fun. It includes adventure, travel, and novelty. Nevertheless, it is still a job.

Paul Petzoldt used to say that working for NOLS is not a real job and that instructors should stay with the school for a while, and then move on.<sup>5</sup> We believe that for NOLS to survive another 55 years, we must adopt a very different philosophy: that working for NOLS is, in fact, a “real job.”

To make that philosophy a reality, the organization has a long way to go

- 65% of faculty live on less than \$30,000/year total, *including their income from sources other than NOLS.* This last is especially striking, considering that 55% of faculty earn less than 25% of their income from NOLS, and 73% earn less than 50% from NOLS.<sup>6</sup>
- The average field faculty member pay rate in FY18 was \$123/day. An instructor working 25 weeks a year (one of several possible definitions of “full-time” fieldwork) at this pay rate would earn \$21,525 before taxes.

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<sup>5</sup> John Gans, personal communication with Sean Williams, February 2016.

<sup>6</sup> NIA Field Faculty Lifestyle Survey, 2016. <http://www.nolsinstructorassociation.org/2016Results>.

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- To work a standard 2,000 hour year in 25 weeks, this instructor would have to work 80 hours per week, or 11.4 hours per day. In the past this might have been realistic; today expectations have grown, and an instructor working only 11.4 hours per day would be unlikely to be offered another contract.<sup>7</sup> A 14.3 hour day, which is more realistic given current expectations, would require 20 weeks of work to reach 2,000 hours per year. \$123/day for 20 weeks is \$17,220.
  - The federal poverty line for a one-person household in 2018 was \$12,140. The median yearly income for full-time workers in the U.S. in the first quarter of 2018 was \$45,396.<sup>8</sup> At the federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hour (which has not changed since 2009),<sup>9</sup> a full-time worker would earn \$15,080 per year. At the \$15 minimum wage that is in the process of adoption in many cities and states, yearly full-time earnings would be \$31,200.
  - In 2016, 38.9% of field faculty did not rent or own their own living space (i.e., they lived at NOLS campuses, or stayed rent-free with friends and family).
  - 31.6% of field faculty report that they are struggling to make progress on their NOLS career, while 20.1% “have no idea where their NOLS career is going.”
  - Perhaps most tellingly, a majority of field instructors, 56.4%, reported supplementing their NOLS income with income from a non-job source, e.g. family support. The myth that the typical NOLS field instructor is a “trustafarian,” relying on a Trust Fund to make up for their shortfall in earnings, has turned out not to be a myth after all.

We include the labor statistics above to provide some perspective on the current reality of jobs in the United States. We submit that rigorously considering NOLS field and classroom teaching as a *regular job*, with considerable and increasingly professional expectations, for considerations of income and job security, is no different than thinking of NOLS as a *business* when considering financial strategy, growth, expense management, and income sources. NOLS is, to be sure, a vision-driven global non-profit organization, started and run largely by former climbing bums, as Board of Trustees chair Duncan Dayton put it at the 2015 State of the School meeting. It is “the leader in wilderness education,” and a vibrant,

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<sup>7</sup> See below for a more extensive discussion of a realistic workday and work-year and sustainable work-life balance for field faculty.

<sup>8</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.t01.htm>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/wages/minimumwage>.

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intense, and unusual community in which work and personal lives mix to a very high degree. It is also a business, and indeed, NOLS' financial progress over the past few decades is evidence that thinking of NOLS as a business has been key to its success, and perhaps even to its survival. Likewise, taking a NOLS career seriously as a *regular job*, and refusing to accept the implicit idea that, because it is an unusual job that comes with great rewards and the expectation of great sacrifices, it need not provide a living.

## **The reality of part-time work**

For most employees, NOLS work is part-time work. In 2016, only 20% of field faculty members worked more than 15 weeks for NOLS, and only 4.2% worked more than 25 weeks.<sup>10</sup> 55% made less than a quarter of their yearly income from NOLS.<sup>11</sup> In-town staff at our locations are predominantly seasonal. Only Headquarters staff and a few senior managers at NOLS campuses work for NOLS as a full-time, year-round job.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that while some NOLS employees use NOLS work to fill in schedules otherwise taken up with teaching, ski patrolling, etc., many, many employees spend years striving for high volume work with NOLS. In other words, maintaining a largely part-time workforce has obvious and huge benefits for NOLS, but is often not mutually beneficial for the employee.

The part-time nature of NOLS work will remain largely inescapable unless fall/spring expedition enrollment becomes equal to summer enrollment.<sup>13</sup> Without deep changes in enrollment, NOLS will continue to need more employees in the summer than it does in the fall, winter, and spring. This fact obscures NOLS' share of responsibility in providing a meaningful living to its employees. An employer's responsibility for this is much clearer for full-time employees, because in most cases they have no other income, and must live entirely from their full-time wage or salary. With part-time workers, it is easy for an

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<sup>10</sup> *NIA 2016 Field Faculty Lifestyle Survey.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Some location staff and field staff are technically underemployed, working less than full-time for NOLS, but not able to or desirous of filling the gap with another job

<sup>13</sup> In FY18, field off-season student days (for the nine months from September through May) were 53.16% of total students days. This means that almost half of NOLS' need for field faculty occurs over the three-month summer season. The ratio of summer to off-season field student days has wavered since 2011-2018, but not changed substantially, while overall field student days have decreased slightly over the same time period. Marketing section, NOLS Board of Trustees Report, October 2018.

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employer to emphasize their short-term, contractual commitment, and to feel justified that the employee must fend for themselves the rest of the time.

Some part-time NOLS employees may have additional, lucrative jobs, independent wealth, be young enough to rely partially on their families, or choose to reject even some of the more modest aspirations typical of contemporary America, but it is not realistic, or honest, to rely on this fact in setting pay scales. We submit that consideration of wages should always take into account *what the worker would make at that pay rate on a full-time basis*. Discussion of hourly or daily pay rates should always carry with it the numbers for the yearly income that a full-time worker at this pay rate would earn.

### **The field faculty “work day”**

The amount of time that represents realistic full-time work for field instructors is debatable. Those few instructors (less than 2% of faculty) lucky enough to participate in the Annual Faculty Program (AFP) work 25 weeks per year. As mentioned above, 25 weeks per year comes to 11.4 hours per day, based on a 2,000 hour work year (40 hours per week, with 2 weeks of vacation). 11.4 hours sounds like a long workday, but on a modern NOLS field course, an instructor would have a hard time justifying taking 4.6 hours “off.” The culture at NOLS is one of excellence and consistent effort, and in the field in 2020, that means constant attention and presence.

There was a time, as recently as the early 2000s, when it was normal on most days in the field for instructors, after the travel day was over, a formal class had perhaps been taught by one instructor, and LODs had been briefed for the next day, to be “off” for the night. With three instructors, one or two might be “off” even earlier. “Off,” of course, meant that one was then on a hopefully pleasant camping trip with one’s co-workers, until “work” started the next morning. Of course the instructor who was “off” was always on hand in the event of an emergency. Even being “on-hand” meant something different than it does today: for LNT reasons and to foster greater student independence, instructors often camped and cooked quite far away from students, often so far that it was typical for them not to know where every student tent was, or for every student to know where they were. It

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was a different world. After all, it was only in the early 1990s that instructors began to stay in the field during ISGE.<sup>14</sup>

At NOLS today, with changing student and parental expectations of an educators' role, and after noticing periodic and worrisome episodes of failure in community-building and inclusion on some courses, we have developed a culture of constant presence, engagement, and whole-course community. Instructors camping or cooking out of earshot of students, or even out of easy conversation distance, is looked down on, and now happens infrequently. We have learned that students need not just an introductory lesson, but regular coaching on basic skills, and thus regular instructor presence, as well as more frequent and in-depth "check-ins." We make every effort that the instructors be part of the community on the course, not a separate class of people who interact only professionally and are often physically removed. And we expect instructors to have their ears close to the group to learn about, and intervene quickly on issues impacting the Positive Learning Environment.

The reality is that "off time" rarely exists on NOLS courses. For example, you may picture pleasant hours laughing and joking with co-instructors in the tent or around the Whisperlite stove. Surely that is not work. Yet laughing and joking slides into course planning and discussion of student needs. Students stop by and ask for help planning the next day's route. Co-instructors require and deserve feedback, mentorship, career advice, and support; indeed, improving these is currently a high-priority goal of the Education Department. Those times around the stove and in the tent while, pleasant and valuable, more frequently take on the tone of working with colleagues rather than friends and are primary opportunities for professional development.

What about independent student group travel (ISGT), and independent student group expeditions (ISGE)? Don't instructors look forward to those as essentially a fun paid vacation? Should that perk be accounted for, at least implicitly, in a compensation package? But not all courses have ISGT or ISGE. And independent student travel, a keystone element of the NOLS curriculum, is only possible because we maintain a highly trained rescue squad

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Dernocoeur, *A Worthy Expedition*. Students still do ISGE without instructors in the field on Patagonia semesters and years and on PNW semesters.

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within at most a day's hike from our student groups, which is available for daily contact via satellite telephone. That rescue squad is, of course, the instructor team, who is not taking a paid hiking vacation.

These responsibilities undertaken by instructors, which we value and which measurably improve the student experience, are *in addition to* the main course activities of actively teaching students to travel the wilderness. Travel days can last anywhere from 4-12 hours, hours during which instructors, either alone or working together, manage risk, provide coaching for genuine student leadership, and build relationships with young strangers. This does not all fit into 11.4 hours.

A generous estimate is that there are two hours per day to genuinely “not work”. With eight hours of sleep, this leaves 14 hours for work—and as we have outlined, instructors are working. 14 hours per day, for 30 days. And when 18 hours a day are necessary, 18 hours are worked: there is no replacement to bring in, no overtime to collect. As many hours as it takes, for as many days in a row as it takes, to get the job done well.

14.3 hours per day would equate to 20 field weeks per year (see page 10, above), or to \$17,220 for the average instructor (at \$123/day).<sup>15</sup> For a new instructor at base level pay, \$13,300. That is \$1,200 over the poverty line, \$1,820 less than the federal minimum wage, and less than half the Seattle minimum wage. For an instructor with 100 weeks, working as a CL for all of their courses (which is rare), \$21,406. At 200 weeks, a level of experience which only 9% of current instructors have attained, and a point at which many other job and life opportunities beckon, a CL would make \$23,492.

In between field courses, the instructor must live the rest of their life. In other words, they must do what 9-5 workers do before 9am and after 5pm, and on lunch breaks, weekends, holidays, and paid vacations, and sometimes on their phones and computers during working hours. Things like maintaining relationships, making financial decisions, and pursuing professional development. Regardless of the amount of “work” done in a day in the field, *none* of these basic “life maintenance” tasks can be accomplished in the field. It all has to wait.

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<sup>15</sup> The average field instructor pay rate, from FY2018 payroll statistics. Linda Lindsey, NOLS Human Resources and Diversity Director, personal communication, August 2018.

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Many instructors have worked 30+ weeks in the field for a year, or for several years. Very few, about 5, have done it for decades. Most who have done it report that it was one of the greatest, most consistently life-changing, engaging, and adventurous times of their lives, and that they would not trade it for the world. They would also caution others that while the dream sounds great, there is a dark side.

At the highest levels of the business world, in major financial and technology centers, and in the medical and law fields, years of 60-80 hour weeks are required to set a high-level career into motion. Presumably, these years require that other parts of life such as family, recreation, and personal development outside of work, are deprioritized. The same happens for the field instructor working more than 30 weeks a year. Of course, our 30 weeks per year course leader with 200 weeks in the field, at the hard-driving, over-worked peak of her NOLS field career, would make only \$35,238 in a year: just 77% of the median income for a single worker in the United States.

25 weeks in a year is still a slow drain, but perhaps sustainable for a longer term. Like working 10-hour days, rather than eight. Many people do it for their whole careers. But what we see, and will consider in the next section, are the risks and costs of this difference between work put in and compensation received.

### **Attrition in the field instructor corps**

NOLS risks losing top-tier instructors to a burgeoning outdoor industry that increasingly offers greater job security and higher compensation.

While NOLS has been changing, the outdoor education and guiding industry, which it practically invented and supports with the development of best practices and highly qualified instructors, has changed along with it. Indeed, it has perhaps changed even more. A NOLS faculty member's options for interesting and challenging employment in a wilderness-oriented field have exploded since the 1980s, when working for NOLS was the undisputed greatest job imaginable in the fledgling industry. NOLS is no doubt still an attractive option, especially for our grads, who have a deep sense of the school's mission, style, and community from their own experiences. Yet the secret is out: that pay at NOLS is low, job security is lower, and that it takes an increasingly unlikely combination of

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persistence, luck, and outside income to stick around long enough to work full-time, make a little more money as a course leader, and advance to multiple skill types.

Examples of places where NOLS field instructors are in high demand to do similar work for drastically better compensation are myriad. The Chadwick School, in Los Angeles, hires underemployed or former NOLS instructors, among others, to run multi-week backpacking expeditions for their 12th grade students in the Southern Sierra. In 2019, their *starting* wage was \$313.52. By way of comparison, in 2020 the NOLS field payscale topped out at \$209 for an instructor with 500 or more weeks in the field for NOLS, working as a course leader during midsummer. Entry wage for midsummer work at NOLS is \$107/day. It is also worth considering that instructors typically need not take some sort of “Instructor Course,” with the attendant investment of time and money, before leading trips for places like the Chadwick School. Indeed, when looked at from the instructors point of view, and through a lens of return on investment and financial sustainability, one might be tempted to wonder how NOLS is attracting any new field instructors at all.

Anecdotally, one NOLS sea kayaking instructor from British Columbia has been verbally harassed by her fellow B.C. kayak guides for “depressing wages in our industry by being willing to work for NOLS.” Our mountaineering course leaders could choose to work another summer in Alaska, at \$150-200/day, or could sign on as guides on Denali, a job easy to obtain with such credentials and with enormous industry cachet, at \$300/day plus tips. These examples have a powerful anecdotal influence among current instructors who are assessing their value and worth to NOLS, and among the potential instructors who might come to replace them.

## **Declining recruiting potential**

Excellent potential instructors stay away from NOLS because they fear low pay and slow advancement. Data is almost always better than examples, and the data also paints a picture of an outdoor industry, both nonprofit and for-profit, that chooses to pay substantially more than NOLS.

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NOLS' long-standing goal for compensation is to be slightly below the median for comparable jobs at other institutions.<sup>16</sup> However, the NOLS Human Resources and Diversity Department has detailed studies showing that NOLS lies further below the median than we would like to for in-town staff at all levels. The NIA's Field Compensation Survey, using crowd-sourced data from current faculty in 2017, found that average wages for field faculty at NOLS were 40% below the median, and that starting wages were 45% below.<sup>17</sup>

This data points toward a troubling reality: within the outdoor education and guiding industry, wages are a powerful disincentive to start working for NOLS, and a powerful disincentive to continue working for NOLS. Of course, no one works at NOLS to get rich. That, however, does not mean that people who work for NOLS don't think about their income. The outcome of this data is that the inevitable cycle of senior faculty leaving the school, or choosing to work less frequently, happens that much faster. As a result, more of our courses are staffed by less experienced instructors. The pressure for promotion due to staffing needs, rather than based on performance and qualifications, grows. Our marketing claims that our instructors are the best, highest trained, most experienced professionals in the industry rings hollow. Just because we started first, way back in 1965, doesn't mean we will always be at the top. We have to work to stay there.

For most in-town staff the situation is similar. At least for U.S. positions, every manager at NOLS seems to have difficulty hiring due to non-competitive wages and salaries. This is reportedly true even at the six-figure ET level,<sup>18</sup> and within departments such as Marketing and Information Systems that are critical to our year-on-year survival as an institution as we face flat and declining expedition enrollment. The difficulty in hiring and retaining program supervisors, who fill an increasingly important role as our efforts at school-wide consistency, best practices, and curriculum initiatives grow, has become epidemic. Admissions officers are typically hired straight out of college, and don't stay long enough to

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Lindsey, NOLS Human Resources and Diversity Director, presentation at the NOLS Board of Trustees Meeting, Palmer, Alaska, June 2017.

<sup>17</sup> NOLS' top field pay rate was slightly above the median, reflecting that many organizations' pay stops increasing at lower seniority levels than does NOLS. However, outlier data points revealed a few outdoor jobs with top pay rates two to three times that of NOLS.

<sup>18</sup> John Gans expressed concern about this during the hiring for the Alumni and Development Director and Marketing Director positions.

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truly perform in their positions, as Kristen Brown (a highly performing senior admissions officer who has since left NOLS) explained in her presentation at the June 2016 Board meeting. Managers complain that they spend as much time hiring as they do managing. At the 2018 Wilderness Medicine Staff Meeting, Director Melissa Gray noted that her department was fully staffed for the first time in two years. She went on to note that Wilderness Medicine struggles constantly with in-town turnover rates, and this has led to a perpetual hiring and training process.<sup>19</sup>

Working for NOLS is amazing. It is rare for someone to say they regret it; indeed, we often say it is the best job in the world. But it is still a job, and a job has to both pay the bills, *and* compare favorably to other jobs that one could reasonably expect to get. This holds true for an Executive Team members, senior faculty, Instructor Course applicants, and issue room assistants.

Anyone reading this report will agree that what NOLS does is unique, powerful, and fundamentally important. That is more than many workers can honestly say about their jobs, and being able to say it is absolutely worth making less money. This statement is clearly true at every pay level. There may even have been a time when NOLS would not have continued to exist if it had attempted to help all employees *make a living*. The money wasn't there. If the person could not make it work—with outside income, other jobs, independent wealth, or by radically rejecting the social expectations of middle-class America—they moved on, and NOLS had to survive without them. And it *did* survive. It faces challenges today—declining enrollment on longer expedition courses, rising costs in many areas, managing growth with inclusivity and efficiency—but it faces them from a position of financial strength.

The time is coming when it is no longer strategically advisable for NOLS to say to most of its employees, implicitly or explicitly, that they should not expect to earn a reasonable living. The excellent performance of faculty to date is an indicator that the attrition of experienced instructors and the quality of incoming instructors is not yet an acute problem. It is, rather, a persistent reality, one that affects our ability, as an institution, to maintain the ever-receding goal of excellence, and one that presages a slow decline in our effectiveness

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<sup>19</sup> Official Notes from 2018 Staff Meeting, taken by Shana Tarter, and distributed to Wilderness Medicine Instructors via email, pp.1-2

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and standing in the industry. It is not a crisis, but a strategic question. Where does NOLS want to be in 2025, and on what trajectory for 2040? What will we mean by “professionalism?” Who will we hire, and how will we keep them? What will be the responsibilities of an established non-profit of NOLS’ scale and success, enjoying financial security, growing alumni generosity, and, we hope, success in the market? Here are our suggestions.

## ***“A Living Wage” and “A Middle Class Income”***

The intent of this section is to establish some goals for faculty and staff income and careers that are somewhat in line with current norms and expectations for workers in the United States. The following section will address the question of when these goals could be met at NOLS, and will articulate some possible strategies to achieving them.

As mentioned earlier, NOLS’ road to improved financial security was achieved largely by adopting the standards and norms of the business world. The young and radical outdoor school could only go on for so many decades fueled only by passion and fried pasta. Phrases like “cash reserves as a percentage of yearly operating costs” and “strategic fund for long-term asset replacement” sounded scarily corporate to many ears at NOLS, but turned out to provide clear benchmarks and goals to work towards on the school’s road to stability.

Similarly, it may be helpful to look beyond NOLS for some standards about the kind of living that a mature and financially stable non-profit with long-term vision and ethical commitment might seek to offer to its employees. If \$13,300/year or \$23,492/year does not sound like much, how much might be enough?

To get a handle on what such a goal might look like, we offer two phrases: “A living wage,” and “A middle-class income.” What would it mean for NOLS to offer a living wage to all starting employees, and the prospect of a middle-class income to senior faculty, program supervisors, and management-level operations and HQ staff?

Here are the NIA’s proposals. They are intended merely as *proposed* goals. Our intention, as always at the NIA, is to think big, encourage ambitious goal-setting, and be realistic and informed about timelines and follow-through.

## An entry-level living wage

The movement towards commitment to a minimum “living wage” has been underway for years in the United States and some other wealthy nations, notably the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> According to *Fortune* magazine, 17% of U.S. workers will live in states or cities with a \$15/hour minimum wage by 2022.<sup>21</sup> Planned increases to the legal minimum wage are underway in 21 states and cities in 2018, and campaigns are underway in 17 more.<sup>22</sup> The most recent budget for the state of North Carolina, written by a Republican General Assembly, provides a living wage of \$31,200/year (\$15/hour based on a 2,080 hour work year) for all state employees.<sup>23</sup> While some of these changes are underway in large, coastal cities with high costs of living; others are in much lower cost of living locales, such as North Carolina and Minnesota. Perhaps most notably, in July of 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation that would raise the federal minimum wage to \$15/hour by October of 2025.<sup>24</sup>

<b><u>NOLS location</u></b>	<b><u>County or MSA and State</u></b>	<b><u>Living wage for 1 Adult</u></b>
NOLS Rocky Mountain	Fremont County, WY	\$9.90
NOLS Alaska	Mat-Su Borough, AK	\$11.22
NOLS Pacific Northwest	Skagit County, WA	\$11.05
NOLS Southwest	Tucson, AZ	\$10.74
NOLS Teton Valley	Teton, ID	\$11.27
NOLS Northeast	Franklin, NY	\$10.88
<b>Average</b>		<b>\$10.84</b>

2018 Living wages, per hour, U.S. NOLS locations.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See the Living Wage Foundation, <https://www.livingwage.org.uk>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://fortune.com/2017/06/30/15-minimum-wage/>.

<sup>22</sup> National Employment Law Project, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nelp.org/publication/raises-from-coast-to-coast-in-2018-minimum-wage-increases/>.

<sup>23</sup> US News and World Report, May 24, 2018,

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/north-carolina/articles/2018-05-24/gop-budget-includes-living-wage-minimum-for-state-workers>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/us/politics/minimum-wage.html>

<sup>25</sup> <http://livingwage.mit.edu>. MIT's Living Wage Calculator estimates a reasonable living wage for every state, county, and Metropolitan Statistical Area in the United States. It also has the benefit of providing living wage numbers for single adults, while many reports and advocacy groups provide

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For location and HQ staff paid by the hour, an average 2018 living wage for all U.S. NOLS locations would be **\$10.84/hour**.

As discussed above, if we were to make a realistic assessment of “full-time” field work as 20 weeks per year, and to consider that those faculty members who choose to work 25, 30, or 30+ weeks in a year are intentionally, and almost always temporarily, prioritizing their careers over other parts of life in a way that will not be sustained in the long-term, a living wage of \$10.84/hour would require a starting daily pay rate of **\$155.01** (based on 14.3 hours/day—see page 10).<sup>26</sup>

- ***We propose the goal, to be reached by the end of the next Strategic Plan, of \$155/day for all starting faculty and U.S. in-town staff.***

It is worth noting that these goals may not be as lofty as they initially seem. Indeed, pay rates for some employees are already very close to these thresholds. For example, in 2020 the starting wage for Wilderness Medicine instructors is \$144/day.

## **A middle-class income for managers and senior faculty**

NOLS program supervisors, managers at locations and at headquarters, and senior faculty are undoubtedly in professional roles, with considerable pressure and responsibility. A professional career usually carries with it some chance of joining the middle class. Nevertheless, it seems quite appropriate for NOLS, a mission-driven non-profit offering engaging, interesting, and challenging work in a generally positive working environment, to aim for a low rung on the middle class ladder for this very large subset of employees.

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only the higher figures for the wage needed to minimally provide for a family of four. The living wage is generally defined as the minimum monthly or yearly income needed to meet basic needs at a level just above the poverty line: basic food, housing, clothing, and transportation. It is not intended to be enough to improve one’s quality of life, or to save for emergencies or for the future. It is not intended to leave any extra money for travel, vacations, eating out at restaurants, saving for large purchases, paying down debt, or, notably, for any kind of insurance.

<sup>26</sup> \$10.84/hour, at 40 hours per week with no vacation all year, is \$22,547.20 per year. The 2019 starting pay for a field instructor in the summer is \$103/day. A field faculty living wage would thus be 50% higher than the current starting wage. The NIA’s 2017 Field Compensation Survey found that the industry average starting wage is 57% higher than NOLS. [www.nolsinstructorassociation.org/bot/5733932](http://www.nolsinstructorassociation.org/bot/5733932).

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Individuals in the middle class, broadly speaking, should be able to meet the minimum needs provided by a living wage without difficulty, and should be able to enjoy some expendable income or savings opportunities on top of this. This should be an income level at which many, not just a few eccentric individuals, can be satisfied to remain at for their entire careers, assuming that becoming wealthy is not their goal. It does not seem far-fetched to say that senior faculty, their immediate supervisors, and those in roles at locations and headquarters which require them to manage others, should be able to meet their basic needs, *and* take a modest vacation, eat out at restaurants occasionally, improve their home, contribute to raising a family, and save for retirement, all at levels of expenditure that are typical of the lower rungs of the middle-class in the United States.

As discussed earlier in this report, there may have been a time when it was not appropriate or reasonable for any NOLS instructors or mid-level staff to have these goals, and when program directors and executive-level staff felt lucky if they themselves could meet these minimum middle-class requirements. It is the contention of this report and of the NIA that this time has passed. NOLS has grown and matured, enjoys responsible business management, and is not under threat of immediate closure. The outdoor industry has grown exponentially, and NOLS' current and future employees now have many other options to do what they love, and at the same time to establish some semblance of a normal American life.

The term "middle-class" is used often, but quantified rarely. How much money does it actually take to join this supposedly large swathe of households? Quantification of a middle class income is actually not as hard, or as potentially debatable, as is a living wage. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median yearly income for a single worker in the United States in the second quarter of 2018 was \$45,552.<sup>27</sup> One of the most cited economic definitions of the middle class, that used by the Pew Charitable Trust, is those individuals or households earning from 67% to 200% of the median income in the area

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<sup>27</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.nr0.htm>. Since senior faculty, program supervisors, and managers have the skills and experience to work anywhere in the country, and since faculty do indeed live everywhere in the country, it seems appropriate to use national statistics, rather than statistics only for NOLS locations.

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studied.<sup>28</sup> By this definition, the lower threshold of the middle class in the second quarter of 2018 was \$30,519. This would require an hourly wage of **\$15.25**,<sup>29</sup> or a daily field wage, for a 20 field week year, of **\$217.99**. 2018 field wages for the lowest tier of senior faculty (those with 60-100 weeks of seniority) range from \$107 for a non-peak PL (\$14,980/year, slightly more than the federal poverty line) to \$156 for a peak season CL (\$21,849/year, slightly less than the living wage as defined above).

- ***For Senior Faculty Level I field faculty (those with 60-100 weeks), and Wilderness Medicine Lead Instructors, we propose an average daily pay rate (based on a weighted average of CL and PL rates) of \$218/day.***
- ***For program supervisors and for location and HQ positions that manage other employees, we propose a minimum wage of \$15.25/hour, or \$30,519/year if salaried.***

## **How to get there, and when?**

These are the NIA's recommended goals for the next Strategic Plan, based on the preceding analysis of national norms in the United States in 2018, for worker income and workload:

- ***A living wage of \$10.84/hour, \$22,547/year, or \$155/day, for all starting faculty and U.S. in-town staff.***
- ***For Senior Faculty Level I field faculty (those with 60-100 weeks) and Wilderness Medicine Lead Instructors, we propose an average daily pay rate (based on a weighted average of CL and PL rates for field courses) of \$218/day.***
- ***A middle-class wage of \$15.25/hour, \$30,519/year, or \$218/day for program supervisors, and location and HQ managers.***

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<sup>28</sup> See Pew Research Center, "America's Shrinking Middle Classes: A Look at Changes Within Metropolitan Areas," <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/05/11/americas-shrinking-middle-class-a-close-look-at-change-s-within-metropolitan-areas/#fn-21509-7>.

The Pew Study uses *household* income to establish its economic class thresholds, rather than *single worker* income, so the income levels it uses are higher than those used here.

A more detailed argument for this methodology, with analyses of other methodologies that have also been used to gauge middle class income, is presented by the American Economic Policy Institute:

<https://www.aier.org/sites/default/files/Files/Documents/Standard/WP007-Middle%20Class.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Assuming fifty working weeks and two weeks paid vacation.

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- ***It is understood that all dollar amounts are in 2020 dollars and would be adjusted for inflation and cost of living increases in perpetuity.***

We recognize that, compared to current wages at NOLS, these are ambitious goals. They would require an aggressive focus on budgeting, expense management, fundraising, and prioritizing for significant progress to be made by the next Strategic Plan. We have confidence that all of these skills are well within the competence of NOLS' Executive Team and Board of Trustees. While we do not have the expertise, nor the access to information, to create detailed road maps to meeting these goals, a brief estimate of the financial impact of these goals, and some proposals for how this might be managed, are appropriate here.

We are proposing goals of over 50% wage growth for a large percentage of NOLS' faculty and U.S. in-town staff.<sup>30</sup> We do not know what percentage of NOLS' wages budget would be affected, since the minority of employees who already enjoy higher pay rates take up a higher per-capita percentage of the payroll,<sup>31</sup> but we will take a ballpark, and probably conservative, estimate of 50%. A 50% increase in 50% of wages paid would require a 25% increase in the overall wages budget.<sup>32</sup> For FY 2020, NOLS has budgeted \$17,132,000 for wages.<sup>33</sup> 25% of this figure is \$4,283,000. This is surely a very significant sum, however another way to quantify it would be as 3.7% of NOLS total liabilities and net assets, which stood at \$114,179,000 at the end of 2019.<sup>34</sup>

## **Potential solutions**

To repeat: as a faculty organization with no direct role in managing the school as a whole, the NIA is eager to think about and propose potential solutions and paths to reach the goals we propose, but ultimately must trust the school's leadership to weigh priorities and

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<sup>30</sup> The fact that NOLS employs in-town staff at international locations on local pay scales deserves much more than a footnote. A minimum of basic equity would require that these pay scales also aim for a national living wage or middle-class income in each country. It may be the case that NOLS already meets these goals in some countries, especially where they are dealing with a competitive labor market, national employment laws, or specialized skills.

<sup>31</sup> Some mid-level salaries might also need to be raised slightly if those below them are raised, to keep those with more responsibility earning slightly more than those with less.

<sup>32</sup> Higher, if the percentage of payroll for affected employees is in fact over 50% of the total.

<sup>33</sup> Jeff Buchanan, e-mail correspondence with Dave Durant, January 31, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> February 2020 Board of Trustees Report, p.68.

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find ways to put ideas into action. Here are some ideas that circulate frequently among faculty and staff, and that we believe have some merit.

### **Slow growth at Headquarters and in management roles**

NOLS has enjoyed substantial growth since the turn of the millennium. Along with this has come substantial growth in overhead costs. NOLS Headquarters is full of new departments, and individuals filling new roles in existing departments, most of which seem important, worthwhile, and, taken on their own merits, a good idea. A more robust Education department, potential changes in Admissions and Marketing, and account managers to handle the growth of Custom Education all seem like positive contributions to the NOLS mission. Modern students and parents demand more depth of interaction with NOLS employees who are not their instructors, from admissions staff to program staff. In recent years, the split of payroll between teaching faculty and the administration and operations staff needed to support their work has been about 40/60.<sup>35</sup>

All of this growth in management is a side effect of NOLS' maturity. A lean non-profit, struggling to survive year by year, would have to get by without many of these positions, and might do less forward-thinking, visionary work, and enable less intentional change, as a result. As we have mentioned, NOLS no longer appears to be this kind of lean organization. Indeed, the school has perhaps reached a point where continual improvements in management, while valuable, are less important than providing a basic living to all employees. NOLS could choose to minimize the creation of new positions and new departments until it is able to meet basic minimum income goals for starting faculty and staff and for senior faculty, and their peers in programming and operations.

### **Utilize our growing endowment**

NOLS' endowment now stands at almost \$56,000,000. The *Step Forward* campaign's goal of \$30,000,000 includes \$10,000,000 for operational needs.<sup>36</sup> The annual endowment release to operations is currently set at 4% of the average of the last twelve quarters (three years), and was \$1,368,579 in FY18. Making a few projections, if we were to assume that

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<sup>35</sup> Scott Robertson, personal communication with Sean Williams, 2015 and 2012.

<sup>36</sup> The rest is earmarked for scholarships, sustainability, and campus improvements. Alumni and Development Section, October 2018 Board of Trustees Report.

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\$10,000,000 from a successful *Step Forward* campaign were invested and released in the same way as the current endowment, and if we were to assume similar endowment growth over the next 9 years, until a potential end of the next Strategic Plan in 2027 (giving approximately 100% growth in 9 years, based on 46% growth in 4 years), a 2028 release to operations might be \$4.4 million, which would likely be sufficient to meet our proposed goals.<sup>37</sup>

A conservative option would be to set clear goals for compensation increases, and tie those goals to benchmarks in revenue, endowment, and expense-management success.

### **Temporarily minimize salary increases for employees earning more than a median middle-class income**

Taken on its own merits, there is absolutely no advantage to avoiding any salary increase for anyone at NOLS. Every NOLS employee, from a newly hired issue-room assistant to the President, could earn more, sometimes much more, by leaving NOLS. Non-competitive salaries for top positions, including program directors and the Executive Team, make it harder to hire top-quality staff from outside of NOLS, and easy for current employees to decide to leave for more money elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

However, an argument could be made that it is important to bring everyone up to an agreed-upon minimum standard before continuing to provide regular, and even well-deserved, increases for those whose salaries already exceed this standard. A good starting point, with the goal of national equity, might be the median single-worker income, \$45,552 in the United States in 2018.<sup>39</sup> It could be worth maintaining the salaries of NOLS employees already above the national median where they are until others have reached either a living wage or a minimum middle-class income, depending on their position.

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<sup>37</sup> This assumption is based on success in development and in the stock market, neither of which are guaranteed.

<sup>38</sup> We note, however, that the Executive Team was remarkably stable for many years until 2017-18, while location directors continue to cycle in and out of their positions, and to leave for higher-paying jobs, at a very high rate. This indicates that Executive Team salaries, which are typically above \$100,000/year, may have been more competitive over this time period than location director level salaries.

<sup>39</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.nr0.htm>. Choosing the closest in-town pay level (no faculty member can earn this much) above this amount would probably make sense in the NOLS context.

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## Conclusions

From our perspective, compensation levels at NOLS seem to have been, over the past two decades at least, a year-to-year business decision, rather than a matter for long-term strategic thinking. Pay levels inherited from the past have grown most years with inflation, and have occasionally been the object of shorter-term, reactive strategic interventions, such as the increases for field faculty from 2008-2010 in reaction to the staffing crisis of summer 2007. Routine studies of comparable pay levels at other organizations have been carried out by the Department of Human Resources, with the general goal, usually not quite met, for NOLS to be slightly under the median of the organizations studied.

A status quo has prevailed. This status quo has been based on the unstated expectation that only those NOLS employees at the upper levels of the school's administration would make their full living or build a long-term career at NOLS. Faculty and entry- to mid-level location staff have either had outside income (additional better-paying jobs, or accumulated wealth), or have chosen to live in a manner radically different, in terms of financial stability and status, from typical American expectations. The turnover rate at Headquarters reached 30% in 2018.<sup>40</sup> New hires at base pay levels, whether faculty or in-town staff, are limited to those individuals who are willing to work for low pay: those who are young, inexperienced, and likely to move on soon, or those who enjoy outside financial support.

This status quo has undeniably helped NOLS to put its heart and soul into other important goals, such as financial stability and growth. At the time, these goals were of greater strategic importance, and maintaining the status quo in terms of compensation enabled NOLS to hold costs down, while continuing to produce mostly excellent outcomes on courses.

The conclusion of this report is that NOLS' ability to contribute to all employees making a living should be a strategic goal. Meeting the standards suggested here would take a level of motivation, persistence, and strategic decision-making on par with what was required for NOLS to achieve financial stability and make real changes in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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<sup>40</sup> Scott Robertson, Annual State of the School presentation, October 2018.

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We believe that NOLS has both the resources, and competence within its leadership, to meet these standards, if it wants to.

Indeed, in an email to all employees dated January 20th, 2020, NOLS President Terri Watson wrote, “I want to tackle substantive issues and set some audacious goals that challenge us to solve persistent and nagging problems.” We submit that compensation levels that are un-sustainable for many, if not most, NOLS employees are an example of one such “persistent and nagging problem,” and can only be addressed by setting some “audacious goals.”

We admit that there are some ethical claims that have influenced this report. We are suggesting a slight change in the vision of what it means to work at an organization like NOLS. NOLS is mission-driven, here to make an impact on the world. Its ultimate yardsticks of success, in the past, have been the quality of education provided to students, the power with which their lives are changed, and the number of students reached. We would like to suggest that part of any organization’s role in the world is also its ability to provide for all of its employees. No one works at NOLS to get rich. Yet living on a NOLS salary need not mean “outside of basic social norms and accepted standards.” NOLS needs to be able to tell all of its employees: “You can make a living here” or, if they work part-time, “This job can pay its way in its contributing to your living.”

A principal conclusion drawn from the NIA’s 2016 Field Faculty Lifestyle Survey was that NOLS has been relying, at times quite heavily, on the hidden outside support provided by the lives of its faculty members. This support comes under two broad categories: the willingness to sacrifice other basic life goals, usually housing, but also other jobs and careers that are used as a form of support to allow the instructor to work for NOLS, or outside wealth, sometimes from another, higher-paying job; more often from family support, or a higher position on the socioeconomic ladder. Reliance on the latter factor is in direct opposition to NOLS’ goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Being able to provide a basic living would make it possible for NOLS to draw faculty from across the socioeconomic spectrum, rather than disproportionately from those of wealthier backgrounds.

We are excited to see what other strategic priorities surface in the strategic planning process. We are willing to consider that, if the case can be made that other priorities are even more urgent, these recommendations might justifiably be set aside, for now. If the

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status quo, in regards to making a living at NOLS, were to continue indefinitely, because of other, more compelling priorities, we would prefer that this be an *intentional* choice, made after an honest and far-reaching assessment. This assessment needs to be made based on the real changes that have occurred since NOLS' smaller-scale and more tenuous past, including in the school's status, the realities of working as faculty or staff, and the labor market in our sector. We hope to have provided here the beginnings of such an assessment.

Our solutions are meant to be points of departure. All of us at NOLS rely on the Executive Team and Board for solutions to strategic problems. In the last two decades, NOLS' leadership has approached long-term strategy with a brilliant combination of vision, realism, and dogged persistence. We trust that these same traits will help NOLS step forward into the rest of the twenty-first century.

As a final note, we wish to emphasize, heavily, that no current NIA board member stands to benefit substantially from these proposed changes. We believe that 4-5 years from now would be an ambitious, realistic time scale for these minimum standards for a living wage and lower middle-class income to be met. If these goals were set now, the current generation of NOLS faculty, especially senior faculty, might feel the beginnings of real progress only towards the twilight of their own NOLS careers.

We want to send our kids on NOLS courses. We want their instructors, and the staff members who support them, to be able to make a modest living at the organization that changed our lives, and that we hope will change theirs. We want these instructors and staff members of the future to be able to say, in every regard and with full honesty, "*We have a very good job.*"