

OBFS 2025 Annual Meeting, Plenary #2 “Brainstorming and Sharing Funding Solutions for Field Stations” summary

Date: September 17, 2025

Time: 8:30-10:00 AM

Location: RMBL

Attendees: Members of the OBFS Community

Plenary session goal: Every attendee walks away with new ideas about fiscal solutions for their FSML, and/or walks away reaffirmed in their current approach.

Overview: Who is better suited to help address field station fiscal sustainability issues and opportunities than fellow OBFS members? This plenary session created space for the community to coalesce around ideas and solutions that the community itself wanted to explore and pursue.

The framing statement for the plenary was: *“What are the issues and opportunities around the theme—fiscal sustainability for field stations, for which you have real passion and will take genuine responsibility over the rest of this session?”* OBFS members were invited to advance ideas that they wanted to explore with colleagues. There were seven ideas:

- Private philanthropy
- Selling conservation easements/other easements on privately-owned lands
- Leveraging existing goods and services
- Ecotourism/Field courses & experiences
- Collaborative field station projects
- Consortium membership
- Trading goods and services (the sharing economy)

Notes from the conversations are captured below, organized in the following broad categories:

1. Fundraising
2. Harnessing existing resources
3. Maximizing networks
4. Reducing costs

Images of the actual notes taken during the plenary are at the end of this document.

There were takeaways that cut across all of the ideas discussed:

- Documentation, marketing, communication, and relationship-building are all sound investments—they will take time and they will pay off.
- Field Stations and Marine Labs (FSMLs) can all capitalize on our most undervalued valuable assets--ourselves and our expertise.

Summarized notes:

1. Fundraising

Private Philanthropy

- The discussion opened with “What percentages of income or budget is under duress or have been removed?” Everyone had at least 10% loss, many had 20%, some had 30%, a handful had 40% or more.
- Many will lose revenue from the researcher customer base as NSF funding is cut to researchers using field stations
- Recommendations for University-based FSMLs:
 - Get to know your development officers at your institution, if you do not have someone assigned to you, advocate for the assignment of a development person
 - Be willing to take on some of the load for them
 - Become familiar with the donor pool
 - Make cold calls and make sure that administrations know what your economic footprint is
- All FSMLs:
 - Do your research to diversify your funding model (articles: [here](#) and [here](#))
 - Foundations—Everyone knows of the changes and loss of funding. Be honest!
 - Resource: <https://sciencephilanthropyalliance.org/>
 - Talk to community foundations and donor advised funds
 - Make it obvious to local residents and local scientists the resources/opportunities at the field station
 - Share your stats! (keep the stats, print them, have them at the ready—also, ask what numbers are most important to whom)
 - Get your story/ies straight: research, workforce development, human health and wellbeing, benefits to society—make sure to match story with foundation interests/initiatives.
 - Put your fundraising plan on paper, follow it, adaptively.
 - Endowments, friends’ groups—start small—possibly even with one donor. With stewardship, these will grow.

2. Harnessing existing resources

Selling conservation easements

- When you sell conservation easements you are selling the attributes of your land (primers [here](#) and [here](#)).
- [Archbold](#) has secured over \$17 million by selling easements, additionally, RMBL has sold easements.
- Even if your field station lands are owned by a university/college/similar institution, there is potential because you own the land. It is a long game requiring relationship

building with governmental organizations or non-profits that work in the easement space.

- The really long game is the neighborhood relationship, knowing your neighbors, meeting them in public meetings (decades on) will help to build confidence in the relationship. Sustaining your land into the future, your neighbors might care about preserving their land.
- There are other ways your land can be a source of revenue: [mitigation banking](#), [payment for environmental services](#) (PES, for water or carbon), [management land agreements](#) and payments (grazing, culverts, ditch maintenance, water level management).
- There is willingness within OBFS to plan and give a zoom seminar about the nuts and bolts of easements.

Leveraging Existing Goods and Services

- Conversation began with “Should I be charging for taking people on a bushwhacking experience?”
 - Monetize what we have and what we offer (payment for environmental services was mentioned here as well as in the conservation easement discussion)
 - Consideration of: How do we evaluate and develop a fee basis for our expertise? (whether it be bushwhacking, data management, environmental monitoring)
 - What do others value? Work with stakeholders in the area that may also benefit from field stations monetizing a program (e.g., partnering with ranchers)
- Conduct routine reviews fees for services vs fees for user-days—are the costs and fees commensurate? Will the market bear them?
- Monetize unusual uses of facilities: recreation opportunities, weddings, or private gatherings
- Monetize access to data (particularly for commercial use)
- Can your station provide fee-based financial and administrative oversight and project management for collaborative efforts?
- Balance leveraging goods and services with affordability: Tiered payment structures for schools (especially private schools)

Ecotourism/Field courses & experiences

- Revenue and capacity
 - Partnerships with tourism companies
 - Paid field experiences for students and the public (e.g. [Earthwatch](#))
 - Fee structures need clarity between educators, instructors, etc.
 - Challenges with the cost of billing systems for external customers
 - Home institutions may require free access for students and instructors, revisit that relationship and budgets with the home institution
- Program models
 - Ecotourism and lodging
 - Study abroad and internship programs

- Subsidized
 - Seasonal opportunities
 - Expand infrastructure to expand field season
- Marketing programs
 - Use programs like Handshake, for broader international reach to highlight field courses, internships, etc.
- Community and collaboration
 - Balance programming with local, tourism interests
 - Volunteer labor to develop blue prints to be used (Rotary)
 - Stewardship initiatives: focusing on local communities
- Case examples:
 - RMBL- Lab tours/field experience tours. Low investment, high return
- Summary:
 - Emphasize the strategy for ecotourism and field courses. Key revenue driver is increasing course capacity, paid experiences at the field station through effective marketing
- Other notes:
 - Several of us benefited from talking with colleagues at Nature Centers who belong to the Association of Nature Center Administrators, to learn from the network how they achieve financial sustainability. From their experience, and our own as FSMLs, it sounds like these programs can either be a big source of revenue or actually operate at a slight loss. It is a balancing act for many between wanting to provide inclusive and affordable access vs. generating enough revenue to operate the program. Forming contracts with big school districts is helpful.

3. Maximizing networks

Collaborative field station projects

- A technology-based network to deploy at many field stations supports the idea of integration across a wide geography and allows for collaborative fundraising, instead of “everyone, singularly, submitting proposals to the same funding sources”
 - E.g., camera traps, acoustics network (e.g., [Motus towers](#))
 - This would provide long term data open to field station users. This will help develop a story about what’s happening at each field station and what is happening across all field stations, nationally and globally, expanding science communication, outreach, etc. AND work to increase communication and dialogue between field stations for advancing science and technology.
 - Platform examples: ARBIMON (sound-based), Wildlife Insights (example: [Snapshot USA](#) (mammals), [Snapshot Global](#), image-based), [AMI moth monitoring](#)
 - Recognition of challenges: data protocols, technical resources, maintenance
- Action items:

- OBFS is hiring a grant writer—how can we work with the grant writer to champion for such a networked program?
- Start small—build on the [OBFS iNaturalist project](#), organize an OBFS concerted BioBlitz. Analyze and publish the results, and in the process—what worked, what didn’t—build from there.

Consortium Membership

- Independent vs institutional field stations have different systems for this.
- It costs something for members, so we need to give them something back in return or deliver services to the membership
- Creating a tiered membership to make it more accessible (e.g., Blackrock)
- Make a “Friends of” program and build programming and services around that
- Examples: <https://tropicalstudies.org/>, [Black Rock Forest Consortium](#)
- Challenges recognized: Recruitment, varied funding mechanisms of consortia members,
- Consistent delivery of services, donor poaching

4. Reducing costs

The Sharing Economy—how can field stations learn from the sharing economy to lower costs?

- Trading services: works well if you are already going to do this thing (Presented was a good example of using this for web design)
- Leveraging funny money for real money (in-kind payment)
- The main challenge to both of these is scaling them up
- Education to build social capital
 - 2 main functions:
 - Local community might not value what you have to offer, need the education part to expand understanding—this is an investment in making your importance visible to the local community
 - Long-term education: early on, they come to the field station for educational purposes, but as they get older, they may be more willing to donate money or land to the station
- Trading goods and services with other field stations.

Images of the actual notes taken during the plenary:

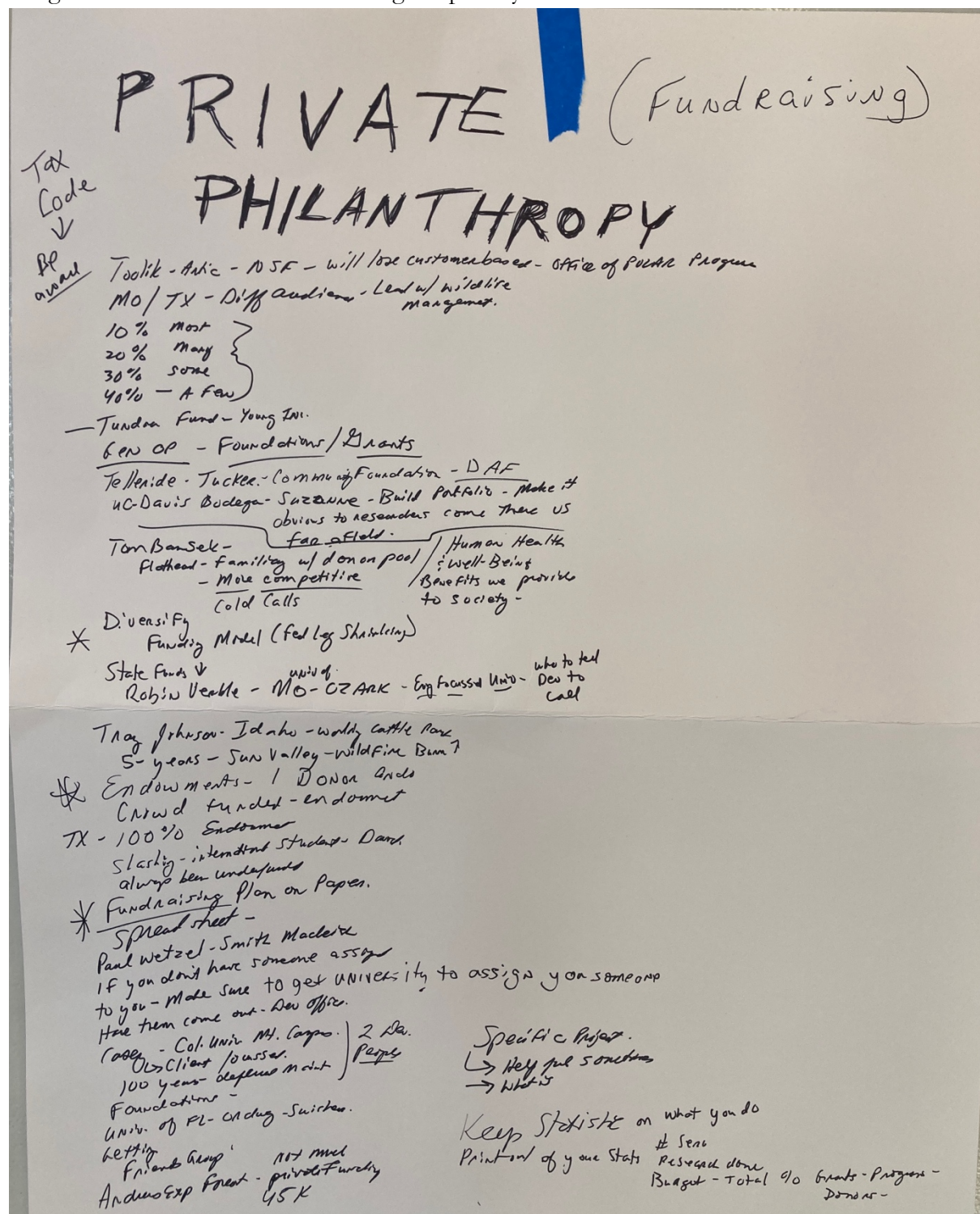


Figure 1: Private philanthropy

SELLING CONSERVATION / OTHER EASEMENTS ON PRIVATE OWNED LANDS.

- Potential is there — unaware
- Where to start (everyone is an idiosyncrasy)
 - govt reln.
 - non-profit (typical land grant)
 - Univ. foundation long-game
 - long-game neighbor relations
- Compare with — mitigation banks
 - PES
 - management agreements
 - management ^{payments} ~~agreement~~
- helping neighbors do same
- action item — Hilary could offer zoom seminar

Figure 2: Selling conservation easements

Leverage existing goods Services

- * Payment for environmental services - training for PES
 - monitoring
 - program establishment
- x Weather station - GDA
- * Spinoffs companies
- x Charge for data? - - -
- x Evaluate your expertise - low hanging fruit - how to charge
 - data management
 - environmental monitoring
- x Tiered fees
 - user-day vs. services
- Unusual uses for facilities use

Figure 3: Leveraging Existing Goods and Services

Ecotourism / Field Courses

\$ Experiences

- Increase capacity of field courses
- Butts in Seats - Tuition Dollars - Student Fees
- Partnering w/ tourism Companies - ~~Kemix~~ (Brian) ^{\$1K/night}
- ~~Summit~~ Baja exp.
- PAID Field Experiences - NG - Earth Watch
- Conservation Literacy
- Marketing for Good/Education → Better
- How do you balance ~~to~~ w/ local tourism
- Peruvian Lodge - Citizen Science Project/Ecotourism
- Study Abroad programs - dual internships - IRES program - Subsidize Research
- Ecotourism → participate in wildlife monitoring = Students & Public
- Lacandón → Rochester Institute - Field Experience that's not abroad - Challenge of capacity
↳ Alternative study abroad experience in country.
- Infrastructure challenge - extend field season
- What's everyone's fee structure - Education, Research, Housing, Meatin Rooms
↳
- Field Course Fees / Course Fee / Per course
- If required to provide free to Home institution students & instructors = BC part of ~~an~~ Indirect Budget
↳ ~~re-evaluate~~ re-evaluate ~~of~~ Budget allocation between FSML & Home institution
- Cost to Billing → System for charging external users
(transaction) Need
- Demonstration Projects - Buildings → Volunteer Labor → Model new blueprints
↳ Rotary & Boy Scouts are good partners
- Handshake → Advertise Field Courses - greater reach - International
- Field Based Experiences like for different audiences - Heavy Marketing & Identifying Oriented

Figure 4: Ecotourism/Field courses & experiences

COLLABORATIVE FIELD STATION PROJECT

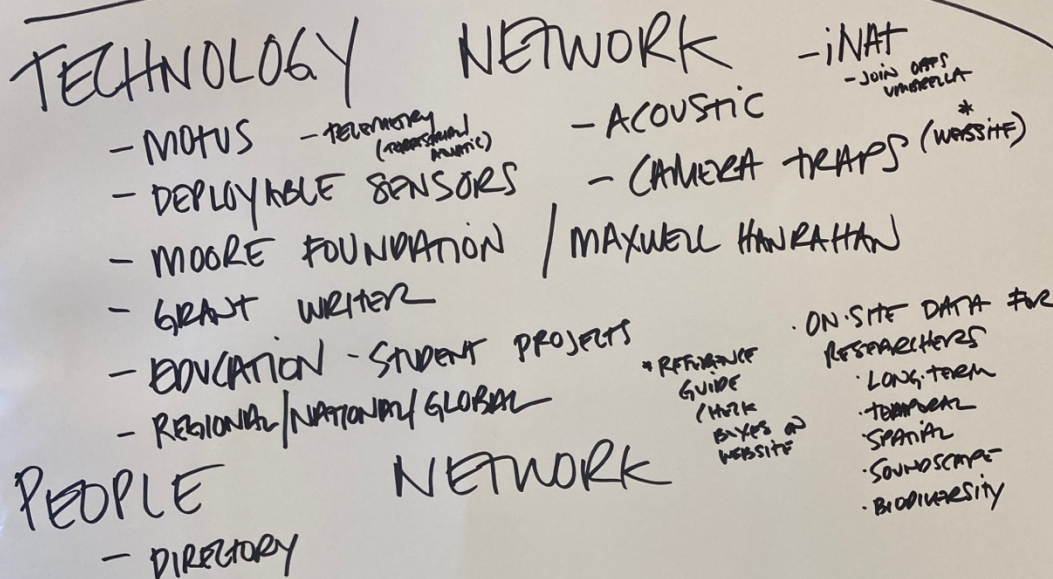


Figure 5: Collaborative field station projects

Consortium Membership

Strengths →

- Student mentoring
- discounted rates
- Networking
- Citizen Science
- School districts
- internships
- "Affiliate Program"
- Staff availability for members
- "Stacked Memberships"

Drawbacks →

- recruiting challenges
- Delivering Services
- Post covid loss
- Poaching donors
- Funding from Members

University vs. Independent
AMNH is an example of a member
"Friends of Program"
OTS - \$10K
Blackrock - \$~25K
Generate menu of programs

- Keep good stats and report.

Figure 6: Consortium Membership

Trading Goods and Services

Sharing Economy

- TRADING SERVICES - FOR THINGS
ALREADY DOING - WEB DESIGN
- LEVERAGE FUNNY \$ FOR REAL \$
- EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL
 - MOVE FROM ANECDOTES TO QUANTIFIED
#S
- TRADING W/ FIELD STATIONS

Figure 7: The Sharing Economy