



COLORADO
OUTWARD BOUND SCHOOL

**STRATEGIC PLAN
2021-2023**



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FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Navigation is a critical part of any Outward Bound experience. It grounds us in where we are today and charts the course for where we're headed. It marks waypoints along our journey and helps us to see what is all around us.

As we launch this strategic plan in early 2021, we do so with pride and confidence that COBS has successfully weathered the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our team's perseverance and innovation allowed us to run a successful, and much-needed, fall season, and our donors have been unequivocal in their support. However, cancellation of our spring and summer 2020 season forced us to make substantial cuts to our team and to our operating budget, as well as draw on our reserves. We enter 2021 in a rebuilding phase.

This strategic plan is the product of taking a hard look at our landscape, coordinating with our team, planning, and preparing to move forward. In charting this course, we have carefully explored who we are, who we serve, and what we have to offer—and we have identified the adjustments we need to make to ensure COBS's sustainability, relevance, and excellence on the next phase in our journey. This is our map.

Guided as always by our core values, we will continue to serve, to strive, and not to yield.



Lauren Schmidt
Executive Director



Photo: Ian McConnell

MISSION

The background of the slide is a composite image. On the left, there's a forest scene with several ropes strung between trees, suggesting an outdoor activity. In the center, there's a circular inset showing a group of people's hands clasped together in a huddle, with a person in a red jacket visible. On the right, there's a mountain landscape with a person climbing a steep rock face.

To change lives through
challenge and discovery

VISION

To create a more resilient
and compassionate world
with more resilient and
compassionate citizens

VALUES

Compassion
Integrity
Excellence
Inclusion and Diversity

OUR PURPOSE

Since our inception in 1962, the Colorado Outward Bound School has been a leader in the field of outdoor expeditionary learning. We are proud to be a member of the 11-school network of Outward Bound USA and to continue Kurt Hahn's mission to change the lives of our youth and young adults through challenge and discovery.

A Colorado Outward Bound School course is intentionally designed to provide every student with the opportunity to face new challenges in a supportive environment; to find success through mistakes; and to navigate through adversity with compassion for self and others. We use the breathtaking mountains, rivers, and canyons of Colorado and Utah as our classrooms, which support our educational framework and give our students a test kitchen to develop their compassion, resilience, leadership, and service. In this non-traditional educational setting, our students are building skills for life.

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THERE IS MORE IN US THAN WE KNOW. IF WE CAN BE MADE TO SEE IT PERHAPS, FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES, WE WILL BE UNWILLING TO SETTLE FOR LESS.

- KURT HAHN, OUTWARD BOUND FOUNDER



EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Our courses are designed to foster personal growth through authentic adventure in the outdoors. We achieve this through a carefully crafted educational framework that includes three key areas.

VALUES

- *Compassion.* Demonstrating concern and acting with a spirit of respect and generosity in service to others.
- *Integrity.* Acting with honesty, being accountable for your decisions and actions.
- *Excellence.* Being your best self, pursuing craftsmanship in your actions, and living a healthy and balanced life.
- *Inclusion and Diversity.* Valuing and working to create communities representative of our society that support and respect differences.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- Challenge and adventure
- Cultivation of a supportive environment
- Progression of responsibility and skills
- Success and failure
- Reflection and transference

OUTCOMES

- *Character.* Demonstrating increased self-awareness and self-confidence while demonstrating understanding and compassion toward others.
- *Leadership.* Demonstrating the ability to set goals, inspire and guide others to achieve them; the ability to collaborate, communicate, solve problems and resolve conflicts effectively.
- *Service.* Demonstrating social and environmental responsibility and a desire to actively engage in service to others.



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**IN WAYS I NEVER KNEW I COULD BE, I FEEL
MOTIVATED TO BE MY BEST SELF.**

Outward Bound has changed my life and the way I look at the world. I have had many epiphanies on course and now I wish to change my life's trajectory. There has never been a point in my life in which I feel so confident in myself and my abilities. I look forward to going out into the world and using all of the tools I have learned here. Outward Bound has made me comfortable, not only being a leader, but also being vulnerable and empathetic. In ways I never knew I could be, I feel motivated to be my best self. I want to help others around me and work collaboratively with my peers at school and professionally. I want you to know that your support of this program gives students purpose and the tools to address the world with ambition and optimism. I have watched my peers on course change tremendously. We have all learned to work together through thick or thin.

- Mason, 2020 Colorado Outward Bound School alum

OUR COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

At the Colorado Outward Bound School, we are committed to curiosity and discovery as a means of bettering ourselves, our work, and the world around us. We are strengthening the student experience and constantly evolving our learning.

The Outward Bound course experience is teeming with exercises in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. And in those experiences, representation matters. Having participants from different backgrounds working together improves everyone's opportunity to learn—and to recognize ourselves in each other.

We are [deeply committed](#) to ensuring equal access to outdoor spaces and experiences, both for our students and our staff. To this end, we are prioritizing and embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout our strategic plan and we will continue to grow this work as part of our ongoing accountability.

We are actively working towards ensuring culturally responsive and inclusive practices across our organization. This includes providing equitable access to our programs, to employment opportunities, and to vendor and contract opportunities. As a growth-oriented organization, we are launching an advisory committee dedicated to evaluate and inform future efforts, including how we serve students and prepare educators who reflect the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of the region(s) in which we operate.



PLANNING PROCESS

As a nonprofit organization with a deep institutional legacy, the question is not who we are—it is where we will go next. 2020 has proven that there is more in us than we know, and just as our students do in the field, we are taking moments of hardship to inspire reflection and goal setting.

In Fall 2020, our leadership team and Board of Directors met over a series of weeks to chart our path forward. Using this framework, our leadership team and staff developed a set of objectives and metrics to help define our work and measure our progress. This document is a result of that work.

We defined [four strategic outcomes](#) that articulate our high-level themes for the next three years. Next, we developed [eight coherent actions](#) that we will take to achieve those outcomes. Like in all holistic itineraries, we also have a timeline.

OUR PACKS ARE ON; WE'RE ON OUR WAY.





STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Financial Stability. Ensure COBS's long-term sustainability and ability to manage risk.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of most 2020 courses, COBS was forced to draw on the majority of its cash reserves. From 2012-2018, COBS also prioritized much-needed investments in our basecamps over building a significant rainy day fund. When the pandemic struck, we found ourselves underprepared for a crisis of this magnitude.

Our focus for 2021-2023 is on paying off short-term debt and building internal reserves to ensure COBS's long-term sustainability. By 2023, we intend to establish a reserve that allows us to manage our seasonal cash flow needs and adequately prepare for the next downturn.





STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Operational Excellence. Drive a student and safety-focused culture; simplify operations; and invest in our people.

COBS is a mission-driven nonprofit that is committed to maintaining standards of professional excellence. We have identified several areas where, with appropriate investment, we can modernize and streamline our operations to benefit student outcomes; improve financial performance; and facilitate the recruitment, development, and retention of top-quality team members.

We are also committed to putting our students at the center of our operations and to ensuring that our culture of safety and well-being—both physical and emotional—is embedded throughout our entire school.





STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Customer Experience. Create the best possible customer experience for students and parents and make deep connections with our families.

As our staff from the '60s and '70s recall, we used to include a quarter in our first aid kits so that in an emergency, someone could hike to the nearest town and find a pay phone. While we have long since graduated from that approach and we're loving our satellite phones, we realize there is still more we can do to stay connected, both on course and beyond.

As the world becomes increasingly digital, we are working to modernize all stages of the student and parent experience including a more streamlined enrollment process, on-course updates for families, and post-course follow-up. We are rethinking our systems to make information and content from our transformational student experiences easier to access, share, and learn from.





STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Development of more diverse programs. Build more opportunities to serve students in our local communities.

Approximately 70% of COBS's open enrollment students come from outside of Colorado and Utah (our scholarship program is an exception—almost all of our full scholarship students are from Colorado and Utah). We are committed to serving even more students from our local communities, with an initial emphasis on the Colorado Front Range and our rural neighbors. We aim to strengthen our community connections; provide more opportunities for local students to attend an Outward Bound course; and serve a more diverse student population.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Build our internal financial reserves and eliminate short term debt to ensure COBS's long-term stability.

Run the majority of our programming focused on youth courses (age 12 to 25) and their educational outcomes.

Develop strategy for maintenance, improvement, monetization, or disposal of all COBS real estate assets over the next three years.

Design and implement a holistic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategy for the school so that DEI is woven into the fabric of our entire organization.

Increase field staff wages to the industry median within three years, with competitive pay adjustments thereafter.

Increase contributed support as a percentage of annual revenue to support the school's long-term sustainability and vision.

Develop our vision and delivery for our non-open enrollment courses (youth and adult) to simplify operations, maximize efficiency, and improve course outcomes.

Prioritize and refine communications with students and families and scale to meet seasonal volume. Use technology to improve the student experience for families and create more accessible data and feedback loops for COBS.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Build our internal financial reserves and eliminate short term debt to ensure COBS's long-term stability.

Objectives:

- Eliminate COBS's short-term debt accumulated through revolving line of credit.
- Establish internal funding mechanism to support seasonal cash flow; eliminate reliance on third-party lenders.
- Ensure that course offerings and inventory support positive operational cash flow.
- Build internal reserves sufficient to cover 3-6 months of fixed operating expenses.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Focus the majority of programming on youth courses (age 12 to 25) and corresponding educational outcomes.

Objectives:

- Prioritize high-fill rate, high-margin courses so that COBS runs efficiently and effectively at an optimal volume.
- Evaluate our course mix each year; maintain flexibility around inventory adjustments.
- Build [Learning Lab](#) and other student data into our staff evaluation, course planning, and training so that student outcomes and experience drive our courses and delivery.
- Refine and articulate our curriculum and outcomes for all courses to enhance staff training and ensure our students receive a consistent, relevant educational experience.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Design and implement a holistic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategy for the school so that DEI is woven into the fabric of our entire organization.

Objectives:

- Activate and engage a renewed COBS DEI working group with representation from every level of the organization.
- Implement defined DEI objectives for all internal and external areas of COBS and ensure that our partners and stakeholders see our [objectives and tactics](#) in action.
- Increase support for holistic organizational DEI work so our DEI objectives are fully resourced and actionable.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Increase field staff wages to the industry median within three years, with competitive pay adjustments thereafter.

Objectives:

- Achieve sufficient recruiting and retention of field staff across both our Rocky Mountain and Southwest programs.
- Increase diversity among our field staff to better reflect the communities where we operate and the students we serve.
- Maintain focus on course safety by developing a retention strategy for more experienced, highly-trained field staff.
- Increase quality of student experience by attracting and retaining quality staff.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Develop strategy for maintenance, improvement, and monetization of all COBS real estate assets over the next three years.

Objectives:

- Develop plan for retention or monetization of all properties based on COBS's post-COVID sustainability.
- Identify and prioritize maintenance needs at all retained properties; develop plan for execution.
- Avoid capital improvements without potential to generate significant additional revenue or savings.
- Develop criteria for additional revenue opportunities and non-programmatic use of properties; identify and evaluate non-program revenue streams in line with criteria.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Increase contributed support as a percentage of annual revenue to support the school's long-term sustainability and vision.

Objectives:

- Increase unrestricted support for the school over three years. COBS will not pursue highly restricted, difficult-to-implement gifts, including endowments less than \$500,000.
- Create additional stewardship and retention opportunities for existing donors.
- Build wealth on Board of Directors and Board of Advocates, increasing the aggregate giving capacity of these groups.
- Appropriately resource Development team to meet objectives of Strategic Plan; develop list of priorities and timing to assist with grant proposals and fundraising.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Develop our vision and delivery for our non-open enrollment courses (youth and adult) to simplify operations, maximize efficiency, and improve course outcomes.

Objectives:

- Rebrand our non-open enrollment courses so that they are easier to understand and implement, both internally and externally.
- Simplify custom youth programming into a sustainable model that aligns with local youth needs and increases accessibility for low-income students.
- Analyze drivers of profitability for this program channel. Prioritize courses that leverage existing instructors and systems to increase efficiency, reduce operational strain, and deliver a higher-quality student experience.
- Design and launch a test of new course options.



COHERENT ACTIONS

Prioritize and refine communications with students and families and scale to meet seasonal volume. Use technology to improve the student experience for families and create more accessible data and feedback loops for COBS.

Objectives:

- Build systems and communication flows that anticipate the needs of all COBS families, including families with resource constraints.
- Scale high-touch model piloted in Fall 2020 to subsequent seasons with higher course volume.
- Ensure that emphasis on a quality customer experience is embedded organization-wide.
- Utilize enhanced data and feedback to improve the student and family experience.



MILESTONES

WE WILL:

- Assemble and launch a working group to advise on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices across COBS and build on the work that COBS has been doing in this space over the past four years.
- Increase field staff wages to meet our industry standard and increase racial and ethnic diversity within our staff community.
- Resolve short-term debt and create an internal financial reserve of at least three months of fixed operating expenses.
- Assess and identify plans to most effectively leverage all COBS facilities.
- Use a data-informed approach to optimize our course model in order to increase efficient delivery and ensure consistency in our curriculum and outcomes.
- Simplify and streamline our non-open enrollment course offerings.
- Scale our 2020 customer experience improvements to meet post-COVID enrollment levels.





2021

- Invest in curriculum development
- Activate DEI working group
- Deepen scholarship partnerships and funding
- Draft plan for facilities maintenance, improvement, or divestment
- Repair short-term cash flow issues
- Develop strategy for non-open enrollment courses
- Scale customer experience to meet increased enrollment
- Incrementally increase field staff wages to meet industry median by 2023



2022

- Begin building internal financial reserves
- Increase scholarship partnerships and students year-over-year
- Implement and assess curriculum development plan
- Identify and fund action items developed by DEI working group
- Continue implementation of facilities plan
- Pilot new custom courses
- Incrementally increase field staff wages



2023

- Increase internal financial reserves to fund a minimum of three months' fixed operating expenses
- Invest in additional capacity for scholarship program
- Assess profitability of new course schedule
- Reassess DEI progress and conduct second external audit
- Identify and fund additional technology upgrades to enhance customer experience
- Complete field staff wage increase to industry median



BEYOND 2023

A more compassionate world with more compassionate citizens

TIMELINE



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EDUCATION MUST ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO EFFECT WHAT THEY HAVE RECOGNIZED TO BE RIGHT, DESPITE HARDSHIPS, DESPITE DANGERS, DESPITE INNER SKEPTICISM, DESPITE BOREDOM, AND DESPITE MOCKERY FROM THE WORLD.

- KURT HAHN, OUTWARD BOUND FOUNDER