



IMPACT REPORT

2024

WELCOMING SPRING

By Matt Baker-White, Executive Director

Dear friends,



Spring is a magical time. Seeing the crocuses push through the earth, hearing birdsong in the early morning, and sitting in the sun on the first fifty-degree day feels otherworldly. All around the WRFI office, signs of spring are no less apparent; piles of gear emerge from the basement, our student enrollment board is bursting with names, and instructors swap newfound articles and ideas for this year's courses. As you read this, a cohort of eight WRFI students are backpacking through the canyons of Utah on our Colorado Plateau semester!

As we shake the snow and ice off, I also find it insightful to look back, reflect, and celebrate. I always find gratitude in both the reflection on the past and the vibrancy of new life. 2024 was an amazing year at WRFI: **45 university students joined us** for eight amazing field courses, **11 high schoolers** took our Summer Exploration course, and **five adults** joined us for Women on the Water; over **200 alumni and supporters came to Missoula** and celebrated **WRFI's 30th field season**; our **Campaign for WRFI** exceeded all of our expectations and goals; and our **Board of Directors completed a strategic plan**, our first in about a decade. As we enter WRFI's next chapter, we're excited to share these kinds of developments by publishing an annual impact report and celebrating WRFI.

I hope you'll join me in seeking gratitude this spring. I am so grateful to be a part of this incredible organization and community; thank you!

Here's to long days and warmth!

Matt Baker-White, Executive Director



MISSION

The Wild Rockies Field Institute offers academically rigorous, place-based field courses that develop engaged, informed citizens and strong leaders capable of addressing complex social and environmental issues.

VISION

The Wild Rockies Field Institute fosters the next generation of leaders and environmental stewards through field-based education in the American West.

WRFI COURSES:

- Broaden the nature of a liberal arts education through experiential learning
- Teach critical thinking
- Foster understanding of and respect for natural and human communities
- Cultivate a sense of place that encourages environmental responsibility

“It’s a constant state of growth that’s so beautiful to witness in yourself and other people. Accept that there will be overwhelm, but take comfort in finding balance. You just have to experience it - be okay with the unknown. Trust that through the experience you’ll get what you need.”

-Josie Caringi, Colorado Plateau 2024

2024 Student Overview

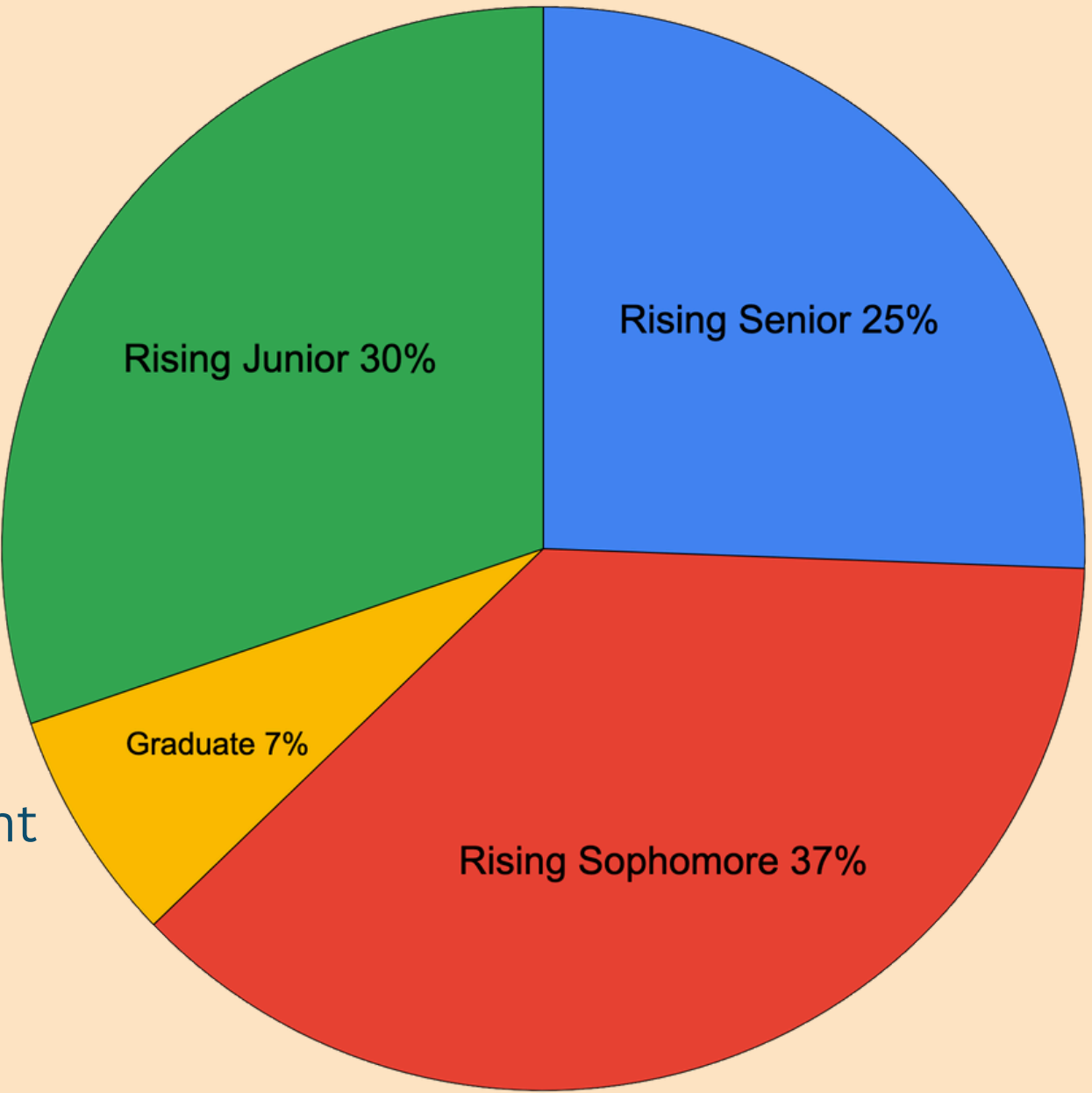
Colleges/Universities Sending WRFI Students:

University of Montana
University of Montana - Western
Montana State University
University of Vermont
University of Wisconsin - Madison
Long Island University
SUNY New Paltz
SUNY Fredonia
SUNY Albany
St Lawrence University
University of Oregon
Oregon State University
Western Washington University
McDaniel College

WRFI Student Majors:

Animation & Illustration
Anthropology
Biology
Dance
Economics
Elementary Education
Envi. Science
Envi. Science & Sustainability
Envi. Studies
Forestry
Geography
Geology & Geoscience
Parks & Tourism Recreation Management
Political Science
Undecided
Wildlife Biology

WRFI Students by Class Year:



2024 By the Numbers

232 Nights were spent by WRFI students under the stars in all conditions: crystal clear skies, Northern Lights, frost and snow, and driving rain!

1,078 River Miles paddled on the Missouri, Green, and Flathead Rivers
(Longest paddling day: 19.5 miles)

1,805 Miles backpacked in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Dark Canyon Wilderness, Horseshoe Canyon, Dirty Devil Canyon, Snowcrest Mountains, and Yellowstone
(Longest hiking day: 9.5miles)

3,906 Miles cycled by five students and two instructors, from Billings to Glacier on Cycle the Rockies
(Longest biking day: 47 miles)





2024 By the Numbers

56 Students joined WRFI courses, including eleven on our Summer Exploration pre-college program!

14 Universities sent students, representing seven states

55 Guest Speakers shared wisdom across courses, including regenerative ranchers, Indigenous elders, elected officials, business owners, and many more

3,962 Pages of WRFI Readers were assigned to students, with hundreds of authors, artists, and poets included

20 Instructors taught courses, with 14 returning instructors and 6 new voices to share knowledge and guide learning

337 Credits were earned in the field by WRFI students!

INSTRUCTOR SPOTLIGHT

KALEB COHEN ~ Instructor since 2024

MA Philosophy

Conservation Across Boundaries

“My academic background is in environmental philosophy. Historically, academic philosophy has been so removed from everyday, on-the-ground experiences and concerns such that environmental philosophy in the academy is almost a contradiction in terms. **WRFI offers a solution to this by immersing students—and instructors!—in the very topics they are studying.** This contextualizing of the learning process provides ample opportunities for students to grow personally and intellectually.

WRFI courses aren't easy, and I mean that in a very positive sense. To succeed on a WRFI course, students must depend on each other, communicate with each other, and work together in ways that they wouldn't need to in a traditional classroom setting.”

“Experiential education presupposes that humans are holistic creatures; we aren't just mental beings, but also physical and emotional.”



Map of Courses

WRFI's geographic focus has always been the American West. Historically, WRFI visited locations like Baja, Alaska, the Ozarks, and the Boundary Waters - loosely defined as "west," and all incredible learning environments in their own right.

These days, we are focused on offering courses up and down the Rocky Mountains, from the southern ranges in New Mexico to the Canadian Rockies in Canada. As WRFI grows into our next phase, we will continue to assess our capacity and ability to offer courses in various ecosystems and geographies while always focusing our efforts on issues of the West.



Conservation Across Boundaries

Environmental Ethics

Montana Afoot and Afloat

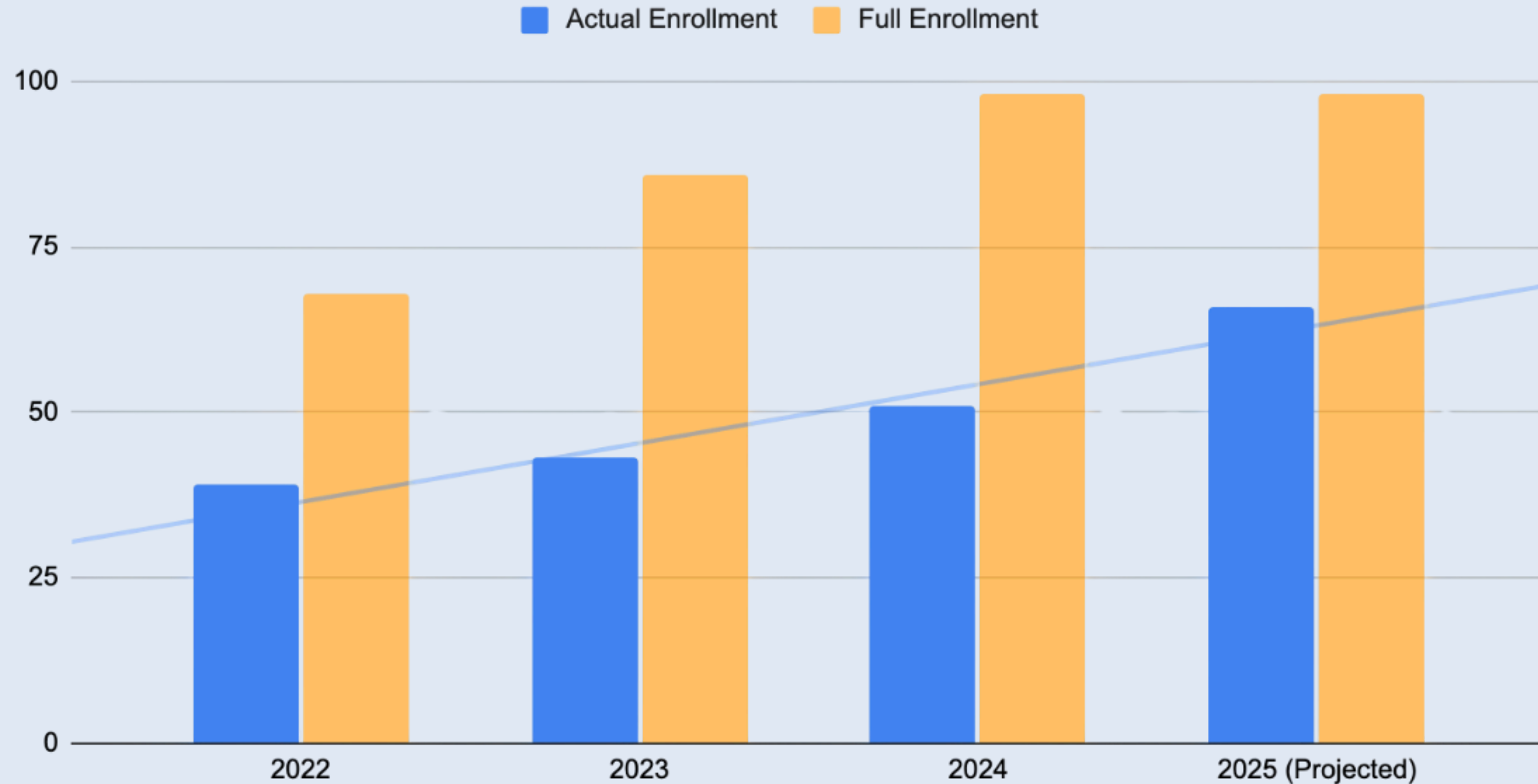
Cycle the Rockies

Restoration Ecology

Colorado Plateau

Southwest Climate Studio Art

Enrollment Trends



WRFI courses remain close-knit, small group affairs with 6-12 students per course. Our total enrollment numbers have grown as we have added new courses and second sections of several of our most popular offerings. WRFI has a goal of reaching a “full enrollment” of 95+ students per year by 2028. Help us spread the word to any interested college students you might know!

“When deciding to take a WRFI course, the most important thing was broadening my perspective and placing myself in a position where I could learn about cultures that were previously foreign to me, which I think is extremely important, especially growing up in a small town.”

-Coburn Hanson, Conservation Across Boundaries 2024



PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT:

MADELYN ANDERSON ~ WRFI Student 2024

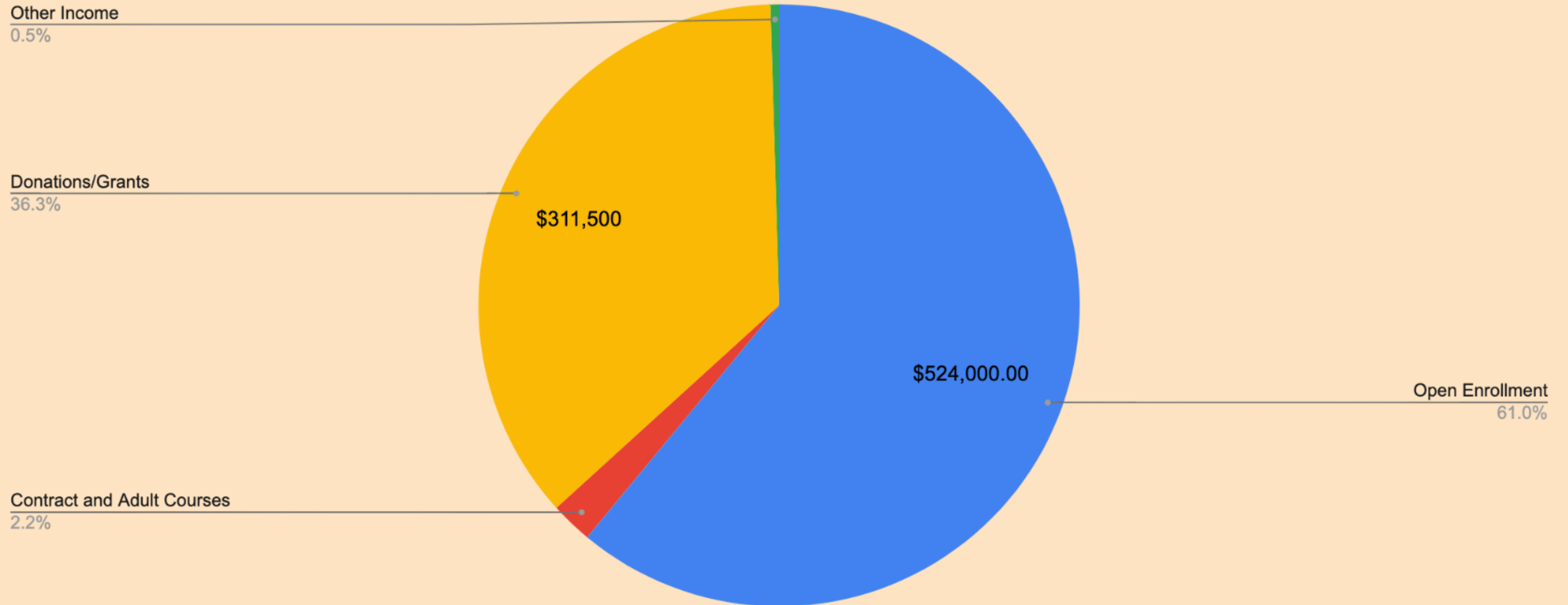
Southwest Climate Studio Art

“I was drawn to the Southwest Climate Studio Art course by the way it intertwines disciplines and centers community. As an environmental artist and scientist, I hoped to build relationships with new beings, human and more than human, to inspire my work. **The course exceeded my expectations,** giving me a new ecological understanding of the region as well as multiple [art] pieces.

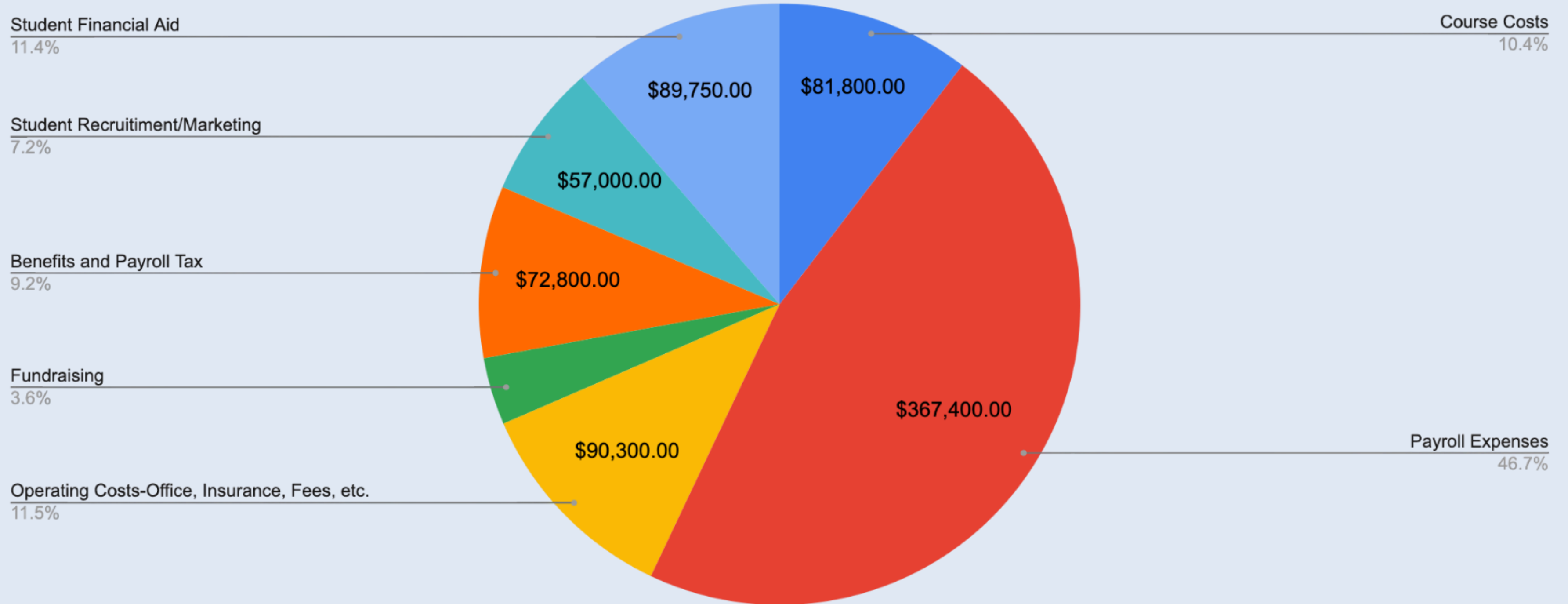
My heart grew ten sizes and my palms opened endlessly throughout our trip. As someone with a special interest in water, I was worried I wouldn't be able to foster that in the Southwest. To my surprise, I ended our adventure carrying a fiber-made river through an ephemeral canyon with 20 other hands, reciting poetry as an act of reverence to the land. **Back in the Great Lakes region, my art, science and life is continuously informed by that experience.”**



Financial Transparency: 2024 Revenue



Financial Transparency: 2024 Expenses



Financial Transparency:

2024 Revenue and Expenses

2024 Revenue

Contributions.....	\$311,500
Student Tuition.....	\$524,000
Other.....	\$23,250
Revenue Subtotal.....	\$858,750

2024 Expenses

Course Costs.....	\$81,800
Payroll Expenses.....	\$367,400
Benefits and Tax.....	\$72,800
Operating Costs.....	\$90,300
Fundraising.....	\$28,500
Marketing and Recruiting.....	\$57,000
Student Financial Aid.....	\$89,750
Expense Subtotal.....	\$787,550
Surplus.....	\$71,200



“Go in with the mindset that ‘this is hard but I’m going to come out a better, stronger person afterwards’ and you will.”

-Elijah Manzer (pictured at far right), Colorado Plateau and Cycle the Rockies 2024

PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT:

LAURIE SCHLEUB ~ Executive Director, 2003-2013

Women on the Water Participant, 2024

“WRFI's adult courses are an awesome opportunity for beginners to try a new activity with professional guides who teach outdoor skills and ensure safety. I witnessed participants gain confidence over the course of the week, bask in a sense of accomplishment, and feel empowered to engage in more adventures back home.

A week-long reprieve from the usual onslaught of news and temptation to scroll was worth every penny. Watching sunsets, paddling through stunning scenery, and focusing on my basic needs while someone else did all of the cooking did wonders for my wellbeing. Further, the thoughtfully selected readings and group discussions around the campfire not only enriched the canoe trip, they provided a unique opportunity to reflect on how I want to live.”

“Everyone stands taller after a WRFI experience.”





“**WRFI is more than a job—it’s a way of being in the world.** It is a community, a classroom without walls, and a reminder that education should never be confined to a desk. Out there, under the vast sky, among towering rock formations and rushing rivers, **we learn what it truly means to be connected**—to the land, to each other, and to the responsibility we all share in shaping the future.

And that is why I teach here.”

-Eva Christ, WRFI Instructor

DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Terrell Erickson and Christopher Puttock

Professionally, Terrell held many scientific roles, including as a researcher, public servant, state biologist, and the Director of the Ecological Sciences Division and the Regional Conservationist of the Northeast States for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, totaling 26 years with NRCS. Terrell's work with NRCS focused on planning for private landowners, collaborating with ranchers and farmers to connect both technical assistance and funding for inventory, assessment, and implementation of conservation projects.

Christopher's career focused on botany, plant biology, and protecting wetlands, including as a conservation scientist and as a nonprofit executive leader. He served as the Collections Manager of Botany at the Bishop Museum, overseeing 300,000 plant specimens and developing the museum's first DNA lab. Christopher was the founder of the Chesapeake Natives Inc plant nursery, volunteered at the Smithsonian, and now is leading Rotary International's environment projects focused on endangered species. Professionally, Terrell and Christopher have created major impact on the conservation of public and private lands.



DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Terrell Erickson and Christopher Puttock

Terrell and Christopher's initial connection to WRFI comes through Terrell's father Ron Erickson, who was a long-time Environmental Studies Director and Professor at University of Montana, an advocate of students leaving the classroom to learn more deeply, and an early, ardent, and dedicated supporter of WRFI. After Ron passed away in late 2023, Terrell and Christopher made a leading, transformational gift to our 30th year Campaign for WRFI of \$150,000 out of the newly founded Terrell Erickson and Christopher Puttock Conservation Fund. Terrell also participated in WRFI's inaugural Women on the Water course, spending a week floating the iconic Missouri River Breaks in Northern Montana.

“WRFI is so terrific in combining learning from the land with academics from scientific research, professors, and work happening on the ground. It is so critical for young people to have a connection to the land, to practice skilled observation, and to understand land processes—whether fire, floods, weather, climate change, etc. Discussions around the campfire or under a ponderosa create teamwork, teach active listening and the skill of critical thinking, and foster students' ability to step back and consider a variety of perspectives being shared. The combination of academic learning, running wild in the woods, creating new understandings, and deep thinking is just extremely exciting to us.”

-Terrell Erickson, WRFI Supporter and Donor



PARTNERSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

National Student Exchange



National Student Exchange is amongst the country's top intercollegiate study away programs, providing experiential opportunities for college students throughout the United States, Canada, Guam, Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands!

WRFI was excited to join NSE as a member institute in 2024, which allows more students from around the country to earn credits towards their degrees when they take our courses!

We appreciate NSE for adding us to their roster and all the hard work they do to provide incredible experiences to our college students!

University of Montana



The University of Montana continues to be an incredible partner to WRFI as our accrediting University of Record. For years, UM has provided invaluable support to our programs, and it's thanks to this partnership that many of our students are able to join our field courses each year and bring their credits back to their home universities.

Beyond that, many of our brightest students and instructors are UM Grizzlies and continue to bring pride to the WRFI name.

Finally, WRFI's partnership with UM's Summer Exploration program brings high schoolers on transformative journeys!

University of Wisconsin-Madison International Academic Programs



The UW-M IAP Department encourages their students to consider WRFI's domestic courses when weighing options for experiential and study abroad programs, guiding several students each year into the field with us. They also ensure these students will receive the financial aid they need and the credits they earn as they participate.

We are so grateful to the IAP Department's continued support and belief in the value of WRFI's programming.

STUDENT WORK

O Alpine Lakes, O Azure Witches,
wardens of the Mountain's bounty
a window to a World below Water
one of green-gray monotone and Logs lost
to Algae's Fog, Puddles and Ponds pave
the path to your otherworldly Origin
to man You are alien
You are fae
You are divine
Your Nature so striking it cannot be so
O ever-moving Aquamarine
Your Crystal view yielding to Cerulean hues
Your Waters painted with Glacial pigment
sheltered by Stone spears, shielded by Pine Glades
the Wind whispers on Your Waves as you lap against Land
They sing stories of Old, sown on Your surface
yet our thirst finds You, O Well,
our discipline but fledgeling failing
to hear Your humble bounty's limits
may You live on, O Alpine Oasis
baptize me in Glory of Your Glacial Grandfathers
as We sit together
in silent vigil

-Matthias Goscha, Conservation Across Boundarie



*Southwest
Climate Studio
Art participants
Ella Rowland
and Stella Roloff
show off a few of
their art pieces
made on course.*



Follow QR code,
or click [here](#), to
discover all
blogs written by
WRFI students
during the 2024
field season.

INSTRUCTOR SPOTLIGHT:

EVA CHRIST ~ Instructor since 2017

MA Sociology

Colorado Plateau /Conservation Across Boundaries / Montana Afoot & Afloat

“I have seen students grow into their fullest selves—funny, vulnerable, creative, courageous, witty, and resilient. They begin to understand themselves as part of a larger system, recognizing feedback loops, thresholds, and interconnections.

Suddenly, students who may have dismissed dry scientific papers or policy texts find themselves engaged. These aren’t just academic exercises anymore; they become tools for understanding the complexity of the world. Learning becomes growth. Transactions become reciprocity.

And at the heart of it all? Relationships. **The connections students build—with each other, with Indigenous hosts, with the landscapes—form the foundation of their transformation.**

Teaching with WRFI isn’t like traditional education. There’s something magical about spending extended time in the wilderness with students—watching relationships form not just with each other but with the landscapes, ecosystems, and communities we visit. **The deep connections that emerge make learning transformative.”**



CAMPAIGN FOR WRFI

The Campaign for WRFI is by far our organization's biggest campaign effort ever. Launched in 2023, we set out with dual goals: to raise necessary funds for WRFI and to reconnect with as many of our incredible alumni as possible. In both of these areas, we exceeded all expectations and goals that we set!

In working to reconnect with WRFI's alumni, we realized that out of over 1,400 alums, we had lost touch with nearly two-thirds over the years. We set out to track down and reach out to as many folks in the WRFI community as possible, with a goal of reaching about half of our total alumni by the end of 2024. Through physical mailings, email blasts, social media posts, and phone banks, we reached over 350 members of the WRFI community and reconnected in one way or another!

We also set out with the largest fundraising goal in WRFI's history by a long shot: to raise \$100,000 in less than two months in desperately needed COVID bridge funding, to raise an additional \$200,000 over the next year, and to secure \$250,000 in pledges to solidify WRFI's financial footing over a five year period. With a total goal of \$550,000 to raise, we realized how daunting this task might be. At each step along the way, our community blew us away. The initial COVID bridge funding materialized in less than six weeks and in total the WRFI community raised more than \$700,000 in gifts and pledges.

The excitement to reconnect as well as the generosity of the WRFI community has yet again proven how impactful and important our work is.



30th CELEBRATION RECAP

WRFI's 30th celebration in Missoula last July was a huge success! And what an honor to reconnect with dozens of alumni, parents, former instructors, board members, and WRFI folks. This 30 year anniversary was WRFI's largest event in our history, with over 150 individuals in attendance at various moments throughout the weekend, including alumni who traveled from Japan, Colombia, New Orleans, Wisconsin, New York, and many other locales!

While each event over the weekend was amazing in its own right, the highlight was easily hearing our 2024 Conservation Across Boundaries students speak about their incredible experience at their final presentation party. We have huge gratitude to WRFI's staff team and volunteer board and committee members who put this event together, as well as for all who came to attend the festivities. In whole, our efforts to reach the WRFI community throughout our 30th year celebration allowed us to connect with over 350 alumni, parents, former instructors, board members, and supporters.

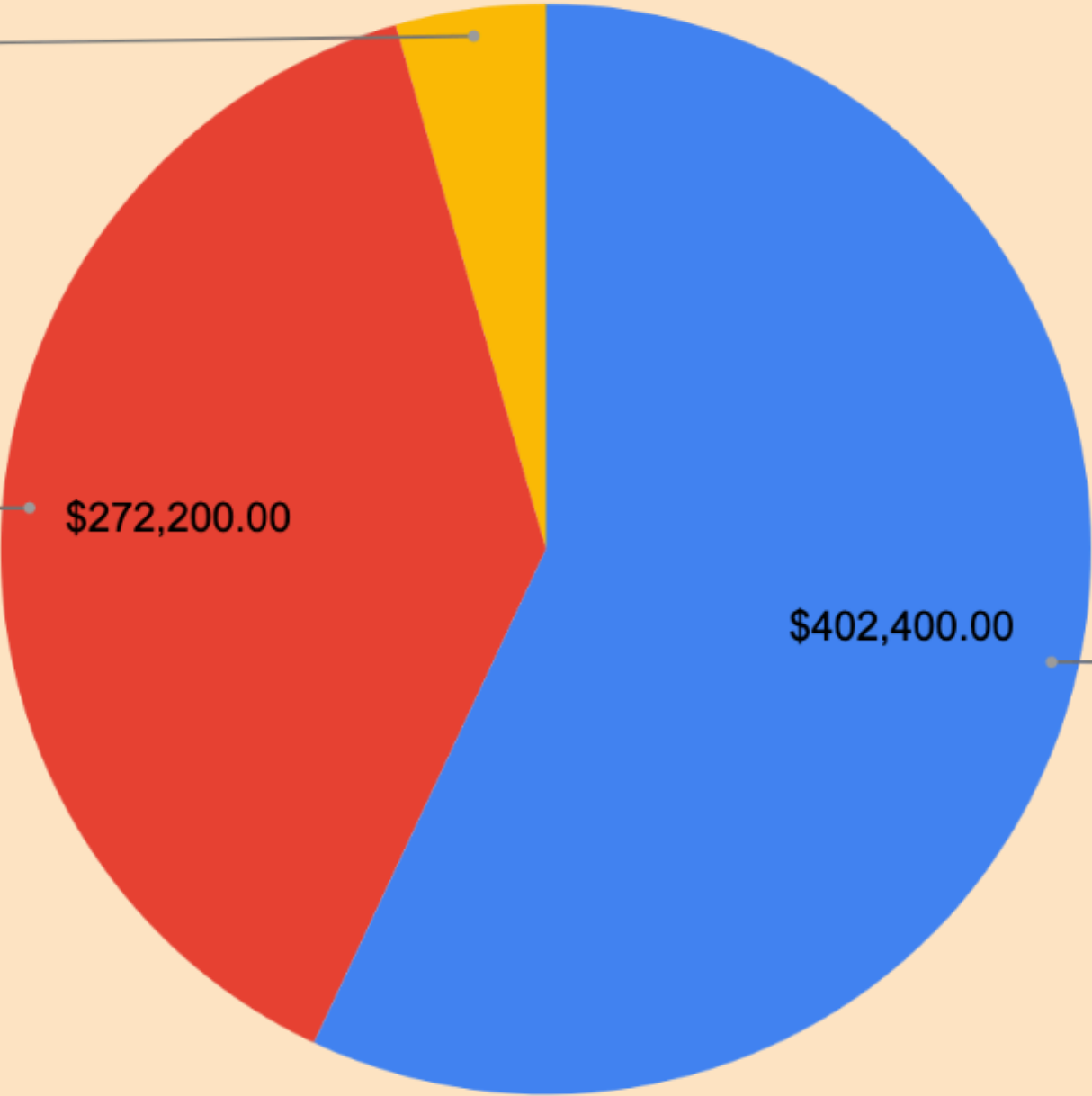
WRFI's tradition of offering life-changing field courses focused on conservation with an integrated rigorous liberal-arts academic program is alive and well throughout the Rockies today!



CAMPAIGN FOR WRFI: FUNDRAISING

Annual Appeal
4.4%

Pledged
38.6%



Raised
57.0%

Phase 1 Goal.....	\$100,000
Phase 2 Goal.....	\$200,000
Phase 3 Goal.....	\$250,000
Initial Campaign Goal.....	\$550,000
Phase 1 Raised.....	\$101,250
Phase 2 Raised.....	\$272,200
Phase 3 Pledges.....	\$300,000
Annual Appeal Donations.....	\$32,550
Campaign for WRFI Total.....	\$706,000



“As my classmates and I have traveled through western Montana and through various areas in Canada, we have learned the importance of storytelling, human connection, and having that strong sense of culture and knowledge of where you come from.”

-Caroline Serio (pictured center), Conservation Across Boundaries 2024



DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Jake Kreilick ~ Donor since 1993 (we think!)

Jake has been around WRFI and attracted to its mission from day one - literally. As a friend of founders Matt, Dave, and Tim, Jake has witnessed WRFI's evolution from an ambitious idea to the thriving program it has become 30 years later. Through his career as a local K-12 educator and more recently as a small business owner, he knows the importance of supporting local nonprofit initiatives that are aligned with his values in the community. Today, Jake continues to be a steadfast supporter of WRFI, contributing his time and skills to the Fundraising Committee and to WRFI's work as a generous donor. The Kreilick Family Foundation's pledge of \$50,000 to support WRFI's 30th anniversary campaign will be transformative for our programming for years to come.

“When it comes to causes we want to address, it’s really important that we have strong, educated local activists. It all comes back to building community at the local level and then magnifying that influence to a larger state, federal, or even international level. I think WRFI provides a good foundation to give people the kind of leadership qualities they need to affect change.”

**100% of WRFI's
students received
some sort of financial
aid in 2024.**



**WRFI is set to provide
more financial aid
than ever in 2025.**

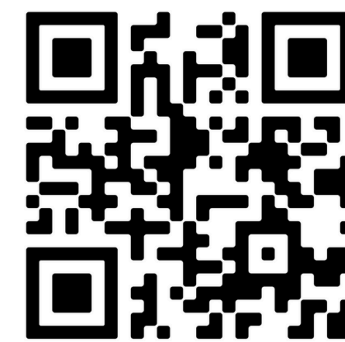
2025 SPRING CAMPAIGN

We need your help in supporting WRFI students!

100% of WRFI students attending courses in 2024 received some level of financial aid. Our discounts and scholarships **totaled over \$89,000** in aid provided for the 2024 field season. Nearly every student applying for a WRFI course today needs financial support. As we look to 2025, **WRFI is committed to further expanding access** to our amazing field programs. We hope you'll join our spring campaign to support student financial aid.

Since COVID, interest in WRFI courses has grown. **WRFI is on track to have over sixty amazing students join us in 2025**, the most in recent memory. Because we have more students, we have committed to offering more financial aid than ever before—**this year WRFI will offer over \$100,000 in aid packages** including automatic stacking discounts and competitive scholarships for specific courses. This is where we need your help in supporting WRFI students.

WRFI's spring campaign has a goal of raising \$50,000, about half of the student financial aid that WRFI will offer overall in 2025 (the remainder needed has been secured through prior donations). **We hope that you'll make a gift and join us in supporting WRFI's effort to provide financial aid to students.**



Donate Monthly!



Make a Gift Today!

THANK YOU

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- Abigail Rich
 - Adam and Erin Ross
 - Adria Osborne
 - Alexandra Leber
 - Alexandra Simpson
 - Amanda Spencer
 - Amethyst Smith
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The Erickson-Puttock Conservation Fund
The Kreilick Family Foundation
The Llewellyn Foundation
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Biga Pizza

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WILD ROCKIES
FIELD INSTITUTE