

# Core Plus Fixed Income Commentary

March 31, 2021

## MARKET REVIEW

The pro-cyclical equity rotation that began in 4Q20 continued during the first quarter as small cap stocks (Russell 2000® Index) returned 12.7% to begin the year. Small cap companies are more levered to an economic reopening when compared to their large cap brethren, partially explaining the outperformance. Further evidence of the pro-cyclical rotation was seen in the outperformance of value relative to growth. Indeed, the Russell 3000® Value Index returned 11.8% during the quarter compared to 1.2% for the Russell 3000 Growth Index. With U.S. economic growth expected to be a robust 6.2% this year according to a Bloomberg survey of economists, the market is not ascribing as much value in holding growth stocks as it once did. Finally, the commodity complex is also signaling a reflationary boom as the S&P Goldman Sachs Commodity Index returned 14.2% for the quarter.

In the fixed income universe, the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index began with its worst start to a year ever, posting a -3.4% total return during the first quarter. It was difficult to find much value in fixed income with interest rate risk in the market running at close to all-time highs and yields at close to all-time lows. In U.S. Treasuries, almost the entire term structure finished the quarter with negative real yields, i.e., nominal yield adjusted for inflation. In fact, the only positive real yield to be found across the curve was at the 30-year tenor—and that was a meager 0.10% real yield. With all the fiscal and monetary support currently embedded in the economy, fixed income yields still have room to move higher as a post-COVID normalization continues.

As we close out the first quarter and position portfolios for the remainder of the year, we must examine the factors that could derail the post-COVID cyclical reflation trade, which favors equities, commodities, and other real assets over fixed income and cash. With financial conditions at extremely easy levels, record amounts of fiscal stimulus, and employers having difficulty in finding qualified employees, the possibility does exist that this pro-cyclical reflationary boom could morph into a slow growth, inflationary episode. As long as the economy stays in the reflationary “Goldilocks” scenario, equities should continue to perform better than fixed income. Monetary and fiscal policy authorities, however, will have their work cut out for them as they endeavor to keep robust real economic growth alive while keeping inflation and interest rates from rising at a pace that adversely impacts the price of risky assets.

## PORTFOLIO REVIEW

The Core Plus Composite returned -2.41%, net of fees, for the quarter ending March 31, 2021. The Composite’s benchmark, the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index, returned -3.37% during the same period.

The portfolio’s duration relative to the benchmark was a positive contributor to performance. During the quarter, the portfolio maintained a duration shorter than the benchmark.

The portfolio’s allocation to preferred securities was a positive contributor to relative performance during the quarter. However, security selection within the preferred sector detracted from performance. Preferred securities continued to benefit from the market’s risk on orientation, outperforming all other fixed income sectors within the portfolio.

The portfolio’s allocation to the REIT sector was a slight detractor from performance during the period.

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## STRATEGY INFORMATION

Benchmark	Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Index
Business Minimum	\$15M
Number of Holdings	236
Assets	\$99.71M

## PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT TEAM



**John L. Cassady III, CFA**

Chief Investment Officer  
 Industry start date: 1987  
 Joined Red Cedar: 2018



**Jason M. Schwartz, CFA**

Senior Portfolio Manager  
 Industry start date: 2004  
 Joined Red Cedar: 2018



**David L. Withrow, CFA**

Director of Portfolio Management  
 Industry start date: 1988  
 Joined Red Cedar: 2018



**Michael J. Martin, CFA**

Senior Portfolio Manager  
 Industry start date: 1994  
 Joined Red Cedar: 2018



## INVESTMENT PHILOSOPHY

“We seek income producing opportunities in the capital structure, in a variety of risk profiles where we find relative value in an effort to reduce correlation to traditional bonds.”

—David Withrow

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### STRATEGY POSITION & OUTLOOK

The end of the first quarter of 2021 saw President Biden's \$1.9T American Rescue Plan of 2021 passed and a \$2.25T infrastructure plan pitched. This stimulus combined with the continued rollout of vaccines and an emerging COVID-19-related reopening has led to inflationary fears and higher interest rates. While credit spreads remained in a narrow range during the quarter, the move higher in Treasury yields resulted in one of the worst performance quarters on record for the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index.

The portfolio's duration is lower than the benchmark. We anticipate reflationary trends to continue throughout the year, and with that, expect higher interest rates.

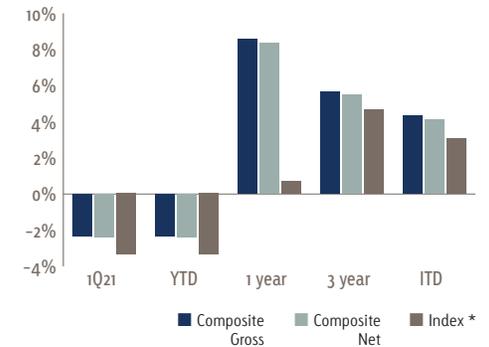
The portfolio continues to maintain its overweight to corporate bonds compared to the benchmark, although we have allowed our relative exposure to decline somewhat during the period. With credit spreads at the tighter end of the range, we will look for potential market weakness as an opportunity to add exposure.

The portfolio's preferred exposure was maintained at the upper level of the range. Preferred securities still can offer excellent risk adjusted yield.

The portfolio is overweight the financial, metals & mining, and energy sectors. It is positioned to take advantage of the potential global deflation that could result from the government stimulus and economic related re-openings.

U.S. investment grade corporate bond issuance was \$582B in the first quarter of 2021, up 6% year-over-year and 16% quarter-over-quarter. Issuance for 2021 is expected to be around \$1.4T, similar to 2019 levels.

### PERFORMANCE



Period	Composite Gross	Composite Net	Index *
1Q21	-2.35%	-2.41%	-3.37%
YTD	-2.35%	-2.41%	-3.37%
1 year	8.57%	8.34%	0.71%
3 year	5.64%	5.45%	4.65%
ITD	4.32%	4.11%	3.07%

Source: Clearwater Analytics

Inception Date 5/1/16

\*Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Index

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### DISCLOSURES

\*All end-of-year index data noted is as of 3/31/21.

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**Index Definitions:** Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index: Broad-based, market capitalization-weighted bond market index representing intermediate term investment grade bonds traded in the U.S. Russell 2000 Index: Measures the performance of the 2,000 smaller companies that are included in the Russell 3000 Index, which is made up of nearly all U.S. stocks. Russell 3000 Value Index: A market-capitalization weighted equity index based on the Russell 3000 Index which measures how U.S. stocks in the equity value segment perform by including only value stocks. Russell 3000 Growth Index: A market-capitalization weighted equity index based on the Russell 3000 Index, which includes companies that display signs of above-average growth. Used to provide a gauge of the performance of growth stocks in the United States. S&P GSCI: Serves as a benchmark for investment in the commodity markets and as a measure of commodity performance over time. S&P 500 Index: Broad-based measurement of changes in stock market conditions based on the average performance of 500 widely held common stocks.

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