

Beyond the Obvious: Measuring the Impact of a Summer Intern Program

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Program and Participant Overview

Lincoln Park Zoo concluded its sixteenth year of the Malott Family Zoo Intern Program (ZIP) on August 14, 2010. Since its inception, more than 350 underserved Chicago high school students have participated in the program.

This past summer, 15 interns, representing 13 Chicago schools joined the zoo seasonal staff. A wide variety of program activities were part of the inclusive and student-centered curriculum including team building activities, access to specialized areas of the zoo, and opportunities to connect with zoo researchers, animal care staff, and education professionals.

The program is aligned with 21st Century Skills and the theme of Environmental Literacy, as outlined by IMLS.

Malott Family Zoo Intern Program (ZIP)

ZIP seeks to provide underserved students with a learning experience that builds content knowledge and interpretive skills. Program goals include:

1. Provide students with learning experiences in conservation science
2. Educate students on informal science learning theory and best practices
3. Guide participants through individual goal setting

Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach. Data sources included intern reflective journals, a culminating focus group, culminating written reflections, scheduling documents, personal goal statements, and rubric scores from performance evaluations and coaching sessions. Data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic category construction to identify dominant trends. Quantitative analysis of rubric scores and frequencies of intern responses provided additional insight.

An internal evaluation, the process was a first for the program coordinator and provided significant opportunity for professional growth. The process was instrumental in exploring issues of internal capacity building for evaluation, equally important to us as the evaluation itself.

What were interns' experiences with conservation research?

All interns (N=15) received multiple opportunities to authentically engage with the process of conservation research. They were able to access 5 different specialized areas not open to the public. They actively engaged with research projects in the zoo's endocrinology lab, and explored population modeling through problem-based – learning activities. In reviewing the data, several recurrent themes emerged as to how these experiences positively affected the interns. The most commonly cited impacts were:

- Increased overall understanding of the field of conservation science
- Increased knowledge of research methods utilized by conservation researchers
- Increased familiarity with careers in conservation science



"My favorite was the Endocrinology Lab because it was very interesting to see how hormones come from poop. It was a lot of fun and I could actually see myself doing it for a living."

21st Century Skills (IMLS 2009):
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

What content knowledge and skills did interns gain through program participation?

The program had equal emphasis on content knowledge gains as well as skill development. Average pre and post scores (2.9/4 and 3.3/4 respectfully) on performance rubrics indicated growth in content knowledge. Content gains were also measured through self report with 100% of interns indicating they either agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (80%) that the program taught them new information about animals and wildlife conservation.

In addition to content gains, participating interns demonstrated considerable skill improvement related to their role as interpreters for the public. The most significant growth was observed in the areas of (1) public speaking, (2) facilitation of learning experiences, and (3) connecting visitors to zoo's mission.



"I learned that gibbons call early in the morning, communicating and marking territory"

"I have become much more confident as an interpreter and have learned to interpret in many different ways to accommodate various guests."

21st Century Skills (IMLS 2009):
Information Literacy & Communication and Collaboration

What personal growth did interns experience through program participation?

The ZIP program is designed to give individuals the opportunity for personal growth and to better prepare them for future job opportunities. Personal growth opportunities that were a prominent part of the program included: leadership development, relationship building, presentation training, goal setting, and workplace ethics.

Data from the written reflections and the culminating focus group identified four key areas in which students felt they experienced the greatest growth: (1) self confidence/self efficacy, (2) ability to cooperate and communicate, (3) career readiness, and (4) receptivity to new experiences.



"Being in the intern program has helped me grow as a person... The program has deepened my love for learning and for animals. It has also helped me decide that I definitely want to go into a career that involves animals. Hopefully when the program ends, I will leave a better, more well-rounded person."

21st Century Skills (IMLS 2009):
Leadership and Responsibility & Initiative and Self-Direction

Full Copies of this evaluation, including detailed methodology are available upon request.