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OU instructor, students create guide for Detroit Zoo

By **Dawn Pauli**, Contributing Writer

A chaotic trip to the Detroit Zoo inspired an Oakland University instructor and his students to create a guide to assist teachers throughout Michigan in planning future field trips to the zoo.

Last spring, Mike Mansour, lecturer in OU's Department of Professional Development, invited students in the post-baccalaureate elementary teacher certification program to chaperone a field trip to the **Detroit Zoo** with his eighth-graders from John Page Middle School.

When Mansour, the chaperones and nearly 200 students descended on the zoo with their science assignments in hand, hundreds of children from other schools already were lined up at the entrance. Unfortunately, on that bright, sunny spring day, dozens of other schools were visiting the zoo. Despite pre-planning, the group wasn't able to accomplish its learning goals.

"If we didn't learn anything else, it was to avoid high attendance times and not to tackle the whole zoo as a learning experience. It's difficult to conduct lessons when it's crowded. We couldn't hear a thing in the amphibian house," Mansour said. "Most of us soon gave up the worksheets we had carefully selected. I was resolved never to allow myself to make this same mistake again."

Mansour applied for and received a \$400 mini grant from the **Metropolitan Detroit Science Teachers Association** (MDSTA) to create a field trip guide for the Detroit Zoo. The grant covered production and printing costs.

"The students who chaperoned the trip were eager to learn how to take their future classes to the zoo," Mansour said. "We all knew things could have been better after our experiences together. I asked them to help create the guide."

The students embraced the project, meeting throughout the summer and fall to create the guide. They also met with the education director at the zoo and researched activities at other zoos including San Diego, Toronto, Washington, London and Chicago, matching those with the Michigan science standards and benchmarks.

"We wanted to develop something for teachers so they have some educational focus, and the students can learn something and not just passively look at the animals," said Kris Gibson, a student in the post-baccalaureate education program and a committee member.

The result is a 76-page, full-color guide offering practical advice for teachers planning a field trip to the Detroit Zoo. Logistics, funding, transportation and safety issues are included as well as three levels of interactive assignments for lower elementary, upper elementary and middle school.

The **guide is available online**, with links from OU's resource for educators, the Detroit Zoo, MDSTA and other science teacher organizations.

"I learned a lot about the zoo, and it was a good exercise in planning a field trip and all the things you have to think about — food, transportation, the cost and lesson plans," said Denise Terry, committee member.

The guide recommends planning a field trip on a day when the zoo will be less crowded. The reservations staff at the zoo can suggest alternative days, possibly even in the winter. In addition, the guide suggests a limited set of objectives for the trip, not a tour of the zoo.

"The polar bear, amphibian and butterfly exhibits are three real gems, they could be the focus of a day at the Detroit Zoo," Mansour said.

The students presented their work at the MDSTA's conference in October where it was well received by teachers and administrators.

“They were wondering why something like this hadn’t happened before,” Gibson said. “They thought it was really good that OU worked with the zoo, this will really benefit teachers.”

In addition to creating a valuable resource for teachers, the students learned a great deal about research, writing, editing and production of a project.

“The students are extremely welcoming to practical learning experiences,” Mansour said. “It’s remarkable that with a little bit of seed money we’ve produced a guide that will be accessible to teachers throughout the state of Michigan.”

SUMMARY

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