

FALL CAMP ACADEMY: A CASE STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL SERVICE AGENCY AND NONPROFIT COLLABORATION

by

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Overview

In October 2015, The Durham Museum and Educational Service Unit #3 in Nebraska embarked on what would become a first-of-its kind experience in the state. The organizations collaborated to provide a group of students, representing four agencies and underwritten by a grant provider, a two-day experience emphasizing Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and aligned to state science standards – an experience that created community, increased inquiry and exposed students to on-site content regarding the natural world.

Introduction

Out of necessity and resourcefulness, not unlike many projects in education, the idea was born: A shared Educational Service Agency (ESA) / nonprofit learning experience designed to serve students living in poverty. The Durham Museum's two-day Fall Camp Academy (a joint project between the Museum and Educational Service Unit #3's Gifford Farm Education Center) served 189 students qualified by four agencies: Boys and Girls Club of the Midlands, Completely Kids, Pear Tree Performing Arts and Girls Inc.

While meeting the needs of economically and educationally marginalized students remains an ongoing educational challenge, the ability of ESAs to collaborate with local funders, vendors, education directors and student-service organizations is key to extending unique learning opportunities, such as Fall Camp Academy, to students of all ages and backgrounds.

About the Project's Organizers

Located in Eastern Nebraska, Educational Service Unit #3 is the state's largest ESA, serving 18 school districts, more than 70,000 students and more than 5,000 educators. As such, ESU #3 has a long history of collaborative community connections – from ongoing professional learning to district-specific education tools. Coordinating with a museum, however, marked a never-before-achieved endeavor.

Like ESU #3, Omaha's The Durham Museum is committed to student service, hosting more than 40,000 learners – who attend field trips, tours and exhibit-specific experiences – annually.

However, budgeting in the nonprofit sector holds many of the same challenges (and rewards) as budgeting in an ESA / school district environment.

For this reason, when The Natural History Museum in London's acclaimed *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibit made a stop at The Durham Museum, area educators began seeking a strategy to extend the exhibit to a wider audience, in particular, to students who might lack the resources (in time, money and transportation) to visit the exhibit and to experience the learning opportunities accompanying the stories surrounding the many award-winning photographs.

Enter Gifford Farm Education Center. A functioning, 400-acre farm owned by ESU #3, Gifford Farm offers a host of standards-aligned outdoor experiences – plus animals “on the go” – to area children and youth. The Farm also operates a portable STARLAB Planetarium, a key element in the cooperative venture with the Museum and student-service agencies.

Working Together

The Durham Museum is in one of Omaha's most robust urban / tourist areas, and is surrounded by an eclectic group of residents, from up-and-coming professionals in newly constructed condominiums to multigenerational families living in depressed conditions.

Liberty Elementary, only a few blocks from the Museum, for example, has a Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) population of 90.7%, according to the 2015-2016 Nebraska Department of Education State of the Schools Report. This means collaborative ESA / social service agency / Museum programs might readily serve neighborhood children and youth in need, as well as FRL-qualified students in other parts of the city. FRL is a measure of poverty in Nebraska, just as it is in many other states.

Nebraska, though economically well-positioned, is no stranger to poverty; and, thousands of economically and educationally marginalized students might have benefitted from participation in Fall Camp Academy. However, the maximum number of targeted participants for this endeavor was 200. This marked capacity for available daily programming space at The Durham Museum, where students began their learning experience.

Additional factors in determining the number of Fall Camp Academy participants were budget (students also required meals and bus transportation), procedures for qualifying youth attendees, staff supervision at both the Museum and the Farm and duration of participants' fall break within their school districts.

All factors combined, a budget of approximately \$4,000 was set for the two-day experience; and, funding for hard costs of the event was secured from an area foundation.

To note: While Fall Camp Academy crossed multiple content areas, and met several state standards, the event was grant-qualified by specifically focusing on STEM, and was to aligned to Nebraska State Science Standards when the grant proposal was written.

Nebraska State Science Standards Met by this Program

SC K-12.1 Comprehensive Science Standard – Inquiry, the Nature of Science, and Technology

Students will combine scientific processes and knowledge with scientific reasoning and critical thinking to ask questions about phenomena and propose explanations based on gathered evidence

SC K-12.4 Comprehensive Science Standard – Earth and Space Sciences

Students will integrate and communicate the information, concepts, principles, processes, theories, and models of Earth and Space Sciences to make connections with the natural and engineered world.

SC2.4.1 Students will observe and identify objects of the sky.

SC5.4.1 Students will observe and describe characteristics, patterns, and changes in the sky.

SC8.4.1 Students will investigate and describe Earth and the solar system.

SC5.1.1.f Develop a reasonable explanation based on collected data

SC5.1.1.g Share information, procedures, and results with peers and/or adults

Source: Nebraska Department of Education, as outlined in the original Fall Camp Academy grant proposal

Curriculum designed to build inquiry, enhance exploration of the natural world, foster understanding of environmental issues and increase understanding of the impact of agriculture in Nebraska, helped shape the development of the students' experiences.

To meet budget parameters, both ESU #3's Gifford Farm, and The Durham Museum, made adjustments to daily tuition rates before the grant was written. Without adjusting these soft costs, combined two-day tuition for 200 students at the two facilities would have exceeded the entire amount of the \$4,000 grant.

By reducing (and, in the case of the Museum, waiving) per-student rates, ESU #3's Gifford Farm and The Durham Museum ensured all students in the program attended at no cost, and received bus transportation between the two facilities, as well as a healthful lunch.

Students were qualified for the program through their participating social service agencies, lifting the burden of eligible-youth review from both ESU #3 and the Museum. In fact, ESU #3 and The Museum and the grant funder were intentional in relying on their selected social service agency partners for populating the program.

As an example, students who expressed an interest in Fall Camp Academy, and for whom tuition was already waived at Boys and Girls Club of the Midlands, were reviewed and selected by that agency.

A similar selection practice was followed by Completely Kids, Girls Inc. and Pear Tree Performing Arts. For a national agency such as Girls Inc., students who qualified for Fall Camp Academy were also those who fell within the high-FRL demographic.

Day 1

Gifford Farm's portable STARLAB Planetarium, a 10x16 celestial dome was erected in the Museum's lecture hall. There, students explored Native American and Greek navigation-by-the-stars' strategies, as well as celestial lore. Lunch, and tours of the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibit followed, after which students made mini-constellations with flashlights and learned about Lewis and Clark's exploration of Nebraska.

Day 1 STARLAB content was developed by ESU #3's Gifford Farm, while curriculum for Lewis and Clark was designed by Museum educators. Directors at both The Durham

Museum and Gifford Farm collaborated frequently, prior to Fall Camp Academy, to ensure content was consistent with state standards and to solidify enhanced understanding of modern-day explorers' and scientists' routines relative to the Museum's *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibit - and to past researchers' perspectives of the natural world. Inquiry was encouraged during all Day 1 activities, as were soft skills, such as team-building, cooperation and self-assurance.

Day 2

Fall Camp Academy continued for a second day, during which time students were immersed in Gifford Farm – an excursion that included plaster-leaf casting, a hayrack-ride and outdoor nature classroom activities. Agriculture and farming heritage were also emphasized, as were continued inquiry and team-building skills. Preplanning revealed, of the 189 students enrolled in the fully underwritten event, more than 90 percent were new visitors to Gifford Farm.

Why this Matters

According to the Nebraska Department of Education, 44% of the state's students are free-and-reduced lunch eligible. In other words, only 56% of Nebraska's students, by this measure, do not live in poverty. This means, many students lack the financial means for soft educational experiences – experiences that take them off-site for hands-on learning.

The reality for students living in poverty is a true lack of funding for field trip and day camp opportunities, coupled with the ongoing challenge of achievement-gap reduction. This suggests every minute in the classroom counts. Even so, some research purports off-site student experiences can build lifelong memories (DeWitt and Storcksdieck, 2008).

“Sometimes positioned as more ‘edutainment’ than education, soft school experiences include such activities as field trips, camps, nature walks, group tours, off-site clubs, special programming, and more. The experiences are broad and varied, but share common characteristics” (Bruckner, 2016, p. 4).

The collaborative Fall Camp Academy pilot is illustrative of experiential learning, and is consistent with “soft” student experiences; and, while such experiences are often not immediately correlative with increased student achievement, researchers point out there are benefits to informal learning conducted outside of a traditional classroom environment.

Without the intervention of Educational Service Agencies, however, two-day, sustained learning opportunities such as Fall Camp Academy might not be plausible, particularly in an environment where districts’ core dollars are allocated toward more readily measurable outcomes. With soft learning, trackable outcomes might only be revealed as participants continue their education and gain greater contextual understanding of related topics.

Just the same, opportunities for such a pilot to be repeated in other markets are abundant; and, while The Durham Museum’s then-director of education was teacher-certified, service agencies can offer the confidence of certified staff to nonprofits lacking professional educators.

For districts challenged by high poverty, nonprofits often have access to grant-funding schools lack. By combining the educational resources of certified staff and shared experiences, nonprofits and ESAs can leverage possibilities for more students to gain a greater breadth of community engagement through field trip and camp experiences.

Anecdotal evidence (such as student comments and agency feedback) was positive for this experience. However, a program evaluation is recommended, should Educational Service Agencies in other markets desire to repeat this model.

It is also important to note coordinating such an effort, from planning content to supervising students to securing bus transportation, requires conversation and preplanning – as well as equal contributions of both on the part of the ESA and the nonprofit.

It was just such innovative partnering that built Fall Camp Academy; and for the 189 students who attended, all shared experiences they would not otherwise have had: an international traveling exhibit, a day at a farm and the camaraderie of new friends.

References

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About the Author

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