

Leadership Challenge Details
Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Leadership Award
Mandy Revak

IDEA:

As extension of the long-term middle school and high school science education programs offered at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium, I determined that I would create a scholarship award to aid students who have participated in the Pittsburgh Zoo classes to pursue higher education at a university or trade school. Ultimately, the award will be a partial scholarship, made up of a nominal monetary amount (\$500-\$1000 per award) designed to assist the winning student or students in subsidizing education-related expenses. Application for the award will be open to high school, and potentially college-age students, who plan to study a science, conservation, environmental, and/or animal-related major in college. Initially, the scholarship will be open only to those students who have taken classes with Zoo U. and/or KidScience at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium in recent years. In future years, however, with proper funding and support, the goal is to offer the scholarship to any interested high school or college-age students.

BACKGROUND:

KidScience, the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium's two-year science education program for middle school students, and Zoo U., the Zoo's ongoing education program for high school students, attract kids who have a passion for animals and conservation. The vast majority of the students who participate in one or both of the programs express interest in pursuing an animal or conservation-related career one day. While both programs are tuition based, the Pittsburgh Zoo offers need-based scholarships to students who cannot afford the tuition for the programs. Therefore, while many of our students come from privileged families, we have students from all socioeconomic backgrounds attending our classes. Even students who can afford the tuition for the Zoo's classes are likely to find it difficult to pay for tuition, books, and other materials at the university level. Thus, I am creating a scholarship that will assist at least one student in paying for college-related expenses.

One of the most rewarding parts of my job is helping high school students to find college programs that are in line with their interests and watching them pursue their educational and professional goals. Over the years, I have had many students ask me if I knew of any scholarships specifically for those who would like to pursue an animal or environmental-related major in college. I would love to create a way to assist at least a few students in obtaining a higher education. I also feel the scholarship will be the perfect capstone to the students' educational experience at the Pittsburgh Zoo. We offer long-term classes for kids from grades 6 through 12, and many students continue to take KidScience and Zoo U. classes year after year, until they graduate from high school. The Conservation Leadership Award will be a way to send at least one student off to college with direct support from the Zoo, and the kids can demonstrate all they have learned through our courses by applying for the scholarship.

In addition, I have built a conservation action component into the scholarship requirements, so that any student applying for the scholarship will have to work toward a conservation goal.

Because the scholarship will be awarded to the “winner”, as determined by a panel of staff members from the Pittsburgh Zoo, the spirit of competition will hopefully inspire the kids to design and implement high quality projects that will have a positive impact on the local community or the world at large.

MERIT:

As the coordinator for the KidScience and Zoo U. programs and as the person with the idea for the scholarship fund, I will be the leader of the entire project, from gaining support from staff members, to writing the application and judging criteria, to designing and implementing fundraising efforts.

I have presented the idea to my supervisor, the Curator of Education, at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium. The next step was to obtain support from the Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the Zoo, and because of the accepted protocol when presenting ideas to senior staff members, my Curator had to speak with the VP directly on my behalf. He loved the idea and pledged full support for the scholarship fund. From there, the scholarship fund proposal was presented to two additional senior staff members: the Chief Financial Officer and President of the Zoo. While I was not able to directly present the fund idea to the senior staff members, I had to provide a detailed proposal to my Curator, who spoke on my behalf. While I would have preferred to make the presentations directly to the senior staff members, I recognize that following the accepted protocol is necessary in gaining support for the project.

The next step, after receiving support for the project from senior staff, was working toward securing funding for the project. While I had originally proposed and expected to begin fundraising to create the scholarship fund this spring, I was surprised when senior staff members agreed to set aside money from the Education Department budget to begin the fund for this year. I do expect to create fundraising opportunities in the future, to grow and maintain the fund, however, but the fact that we are able to allocate funds to begin the scholarship this spring is incredibly exciting! Therefore, I was able to focus on writing the requirements for the scholarship application, creating interest in the students and potential applicants, and gathering Zoo staff members to serve as the review committee.

When I do start to fundraise in the future, I will likely employ some of the following ideas. One of the simplest ideas, suggested to me by another LSI student, is to put marked collection jars in all of the food and gift shops on Zoo grounds to collect loose change from Zoo patrons. I feel this way of obtaining money will be supported and will be successful, as a similar strategy was used approximately 5 years ago to obtain funds necessary to begin the Pittsburgh Zoo’s Conservation Fund, which has been used to support conservation research projects around the world. When the collection jars were used to raise money for the PZCF, the Zoo was able to raise at least a few hundred dollars in loose change during our peak season. Additionally, I hope to utilize further fundraising efforts, such as offering a class, program, or animal presentation in return for donations to the fund, including a donation option/link on our course information pages and online registration pages on the Zoo’s website, asking Zoo visitors to donate \$1 at the admission gates, or perhaps convincing the Zoo to set aside a portion of the kids’ tuition that can go toward the fund.

Once the issue of funding was been resolved, I wrote the first draft of the scholarship application criteria, and I started to promote the scholarship among my students. For the first

year of the scholarship, it will only be open to current Zoo U. students, who are high school juniors and seniors as of May 2011, and who will be pursuing a conservation and/or animal-related degree in college. Students applying for the scholarship must perform a conservation action and submit documentation of their project. I have started to create a review board to review the scholarship applications and award the scholarships. The review board will examine the documentation provided by the applicants and determine the winner of the first Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Leadership Scholarship.

All of the abovementioned actions have been challenging to me, as they are far above and beyond my typical duties, which primarily involve teaching and designing classes. In addition, because the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium has never offered a scholarship before, I am creating something brand new for my organization, which requires a lot of work, communication and coordination between staff members and promotion among students and the community. However, with the wonderful support given to me by senior staff members, the creation of the first scholarship ever given out by the Pittsburgh Zoo has not been nearly as challenging or time consuming as it could have been.

BROADER IMPACT:

The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Education Department Mission Statement is as follows:

The Conservation Education Department is dedicated to inspiring people of all ages about the beauty, wonder, and irreplaceable value of all life on our planet. By teaching children and adults the tenets of ecology and conservation, we believe they will make sustainable choices and take an active part in caring for all life on our planet.

By creating the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Leadership Award, the Pittsburgh Zoo will be working toward fulfilling goals outlined in the mission statement of their Conservation Education Department. The Zoo will also become more visible to the community at large and to the conservation education community in particular, as an institution that truly supports conservation efforts and is deeply committed to supporting and growing the next generation of conservationists. In addition, because the scholarship applicants will be required to complete a conservation action project to compete for the award, the Pittsburgh Zoo, the Pittsburgh community, and/or conservation efforts and organizations around the world will benefit from actions undertaken by the students as they compete for the scholarship.

AUDIENCE:

For the first year, the scholarship will be open to current high school juniors and seniors, who are currently enrolled in a Zoo U. course or who have taken a Zoo U. course in the past 2 years. As the scholarship will be announced in May and awarded in August, the applicants should either be entering college in Fall 2011 or applying to colleges in Fall 2011.

If successful, the goal is to make the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Leadership Award an annual scholarship program. In future years, I hope to grow the scholarship in several ways. First, I'd like to award more than one scholarship each year. Perhaps we could award one high school student and one current college student with the scholarship. Eventually, perhaps multiple high school and college students could receive the award. Additionally, I hope to award more and more money each year, both in terms of the

number of scholarships awarded, but also in the amount of money given out per scholarship. Of course, the amount of money the scholarship fund can pay out each year will depend entirely upon the amount of money collected to begin the fund and the amount of interest and support we can garner in maintaining and growing the fund.

Applicants will be required to complete an application form indicating interest in competing for the scholarship by early summer. They will also be required to design and carry out a conservation-related action project in the community and submit documentation of the project to officially compete for the scholarship. The Scholarship Review Board, which I will work to coordinate, will review the application materials and project documentation from each of the applicants, and will ultimately decide the winner.

Based upon feedback given to me by classmates, I have determined that the best course of action for the scholarship fund will be to award a small amount of money to the winning student or students. Even in future years, if the endowment grows, it will be better to award more scholarships at \$500 or \$1000 each, rather than more money per scholarship. The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium Conservation Leadership Award is not intended to be a full-ride scholarship, especially as the Zoo is not affiliated with any university or trade school. The scholarship is meant to simply encourage and assist students in pursuing biological, environmental, or conservation-related educational opportunities.

Additionally, to ensure that the requirements of the scholarship do not outweigh the reward, I have spoken with colleagues, who may serve on the application review board, and students, who are potential applicants, to obtain their feedback on the application. While the feedback I received was informal, it was valuable in reassuring me that though the Conservation Leadership Project will require work and creativity on the part of the applicants, it is a reasonable amount of work for the time allotted and for the amount of money being awarded.

EVALUATION:

The scholarship project will be evaluated, primarily, by whether or not the scholarship fund is, in fact, set up. Next, success of the project will be evaluated by such benchmarks as how much money I am able to secure to begin the scholarship fund, and thus, the amount of money we are able to award, the number of students applying for the scholarship, and the buy in from the Zoo staff members by way of volunteering to serve on the review board.

For the initial iteration of this project, we will give out an award of \$500 to one high school student. Ideally, in future years, we can also give a \$500 scholarship to a college student and/or more money per scholarship, as discussed above. Another measure of success will be based on the number of students we have competing for the scholarship and the quality of their projects. I hope to have at least 5 total participants for the first scholarship, all of whom should complete a high quality conservation project. Finally, I would like to have one member of each department at the Zoo serve on the scholarship committee to review the projects and award the scholarships.

TIMELINE:

I met with my supervisor, the Curator of Education, on February 15th to discuss the idea for the scholarship fund. She gave tentative approval at that time, and told me that she would

speak with the Zoo Vice President. Due to difficulties in scheduling a meeting, she was unable to meet with the Vice President until March 1st. However, when she spoke with him, he “loved” the idea, and later in the day, she spoke with the Zoo President, as well. She gave the final approval for the project at that time. I discussed fundraising ideas with my supervisor and additional staff members in early March, and I was told that we would have funding for the award for this year at that time. If the scholarship is successful this year, I intend to implement fundraising efforts in the fall. Fundraising will be ongoing.

I have written application requirements, and after receiving excellent feedback from classmates, I have edited the application form and presented it to my supervisor for approval. Next, I have introduced the idea of the scholarship to my students, but I will officially announce the scholarship in May. Students will have two months to complete their conservation action projects and submit all necessary documentation. Application materials will be due August 1st, 2011. The scholarship will be awarded August 17th, 2011.

LIST OF CREATED PRODUCTS:

For the Conservation Leadership Award, I have created an application form and an evaluation form to be used by the reviewers. I have also created a survey to be completed by scholarship applicants and reviewers, which will allow me to strengthen the process for next year. I will be creating a letter and email to be sent to current and recent Zoo U. students to announce the scholarship and an email to be sent to all Pittsburgh Zoo staff to solicit volunteer reviewers. Finally, once the winner is chosen, the winner will be photographed and a media announcement will be created, which can be published on the Pittsburgh Zoo website, in the Zoo’s “Zoo Explorer Magazine”, and hopefully, in the local news media.