The Zoological Society of Cincinnati (aka Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens [CZBG]) launched the Cincinnati Zoo Unto Others program in August 1, 2016. The program was created in response to the critical need for quality STEM education in the community. In Cincinnati, 44% of children live below the poverty line. In Avondale, the community immediately surrounding CZBG, the jobless rate was 40% with 92% of children eligible for free or reduced school lunch. The results of the 2014-2015 school year Ohio State Tests reported 65% of Cincinnati Public School students failed the science proficiency test, compared to the state failure rate of 38%. Teachers at under-performing and under-resourced schools were in need of support and hands-on training in science. The critical priority that needed to be addressed was integrating STEM programming, academic engagement and science literacy in real-world settings.

CZBG was poised to help. As the leading non-formal science educator in southern Ohio, CZBG is an ideal “living classroom” that can have a direct impact on improving STEM education for teachers at under-performing and under-resourced schools with Prek-12 economically disadvantaged students. Through AmeriCorps member interventions and activities, CZBG was positioned to welcome a greater number of students with free access to the Zoo through the Living Classroom Education Access Fund (LCEAF). In their first year of programming, the Cincinnati Zoo Unto Others program successfully engaged 42.4% of LCEAF students through field trips to CZBG with curriculum based STEM programming from both the Close Encounters (education and handling of live animals) and the Nocturnal Adventure Overnights programs. This was an increase from the 32% participation prior to AmeriCorps programming. The 57.6% of LCEAF students who did not attend Close Encounters or Nocturnal Adventure Overnight programs were engaged with academic standard-based self-guided activities during their field trip to CZBG.

The AmeriCorps members created new self-guided activity sheets, taught Close Encounter programs, and taught overnight programs for the teachers and students who attend a LCEAF field trips. It was because of these AmeriCorps member interventions and activities that 11,236 students were able to come on a field trip to the Cincinnati Zoo in the 2016-2017 school year. Almost all of these students or their teachers interacted with the AmeriCorps members either directly or indirectly through program registration, arrival to the zoo, learning on zoo grounds, or taking follow up surveys after their zoo experience.

The AmeriCorps members have greatly improved the accessibility to quality STEM programming for LCEAF field trips. The Zoological Society of Cincinnati (aka CZBG) is the best new program, not only because they have created programming that addresses the critical priority in the community, but they are currently looking into additional ways they can sustain the STEM education effects on every student’s academic engagement in science long after they leave CZBG.



