Underserved, Underrated, & Untapped

Social Sustainability & Programming for Audiences with Special Needs
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• **Julia Hood**, Director, Carmen B. Pingree Autism Center of Learning

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Why work with populations with special needs?

It’s the right thing to do! But also…
Social and Economic Sustainability

• By 2020, experts estimate that 20% of the U.S. population will have a disability
• They vote, pay taxes and have income
• Drive ticket sales: people rarely visit museums alone!
• Additional untapped revenue/funding from sources that do not traditionally support cultural venues
How to Get Started

Step 1: Commit to try something new!
- Learn about people with disabilities, how they navigate the world and how they learn.
- This helps us to discover barriers at our institutions and find ways to remove them.
Step 2: Community Partnerships

• Can help with training and background information to create worthwhile program
• Connections to these populations will help spread the word. If no one participates, the program may as well not exist.
Case Study: Utah’s Hogle Zoo

Step 1: Try something new
It’s okay if you don’t have a background in special education. Many people “stumble” into it, including me.

Learn some new words:
• “Typical”
• “Person first” language
What if you don’t have a special education background?

• Google it!

• Other institutions: Children’s Museums are leading the way, but apply the principles in your own facility

• Volunteers and staff: Someone has family with special needs, and they will want to help you!
Accessibility vs. Programming

• Most institutions focus on accessibility over programming.
• This does not just mean wheelchair ramps!
• Both are important, but programming is more likely to get extra funding.
Step 2: Community Partnerships

• Surprisingly, not many organizations returned my calls or emails.
• Keep trying until someone does!
• Try for organizations that are geographically close.
• Julia Hood answered questions, came to the Zoo to help identify barriers and assets, offered training.
Interview Guests and Public

• Ask questions like:
  – What is the biggest obstacle for your family in visiting the Zoo?
  – What times of day work best for your family?
  – How long of a class could your child tolerate?
Step 3: Design the Program

After learning basic strategies from other sources, as well as what barriers and triggers people with disabilities face, I designed classes with those needs in mind.

- 60-90 minutes, but we need to *move*
- Social stories and visual schedules
- Multiple platforms and sensory experiences
Utah’s Hogle Zoo

Security guards wear red shirts. If I get lost or hurt, they can help me.

Eco-Explorers wear vests and talk to people about animals.

Volunteers teach and talk to people at the Zoo.

They may hold animals or other things I may touch.

If I get lost or hurt, I can ask any of these people for help.
• Call and email parents beforehand
• Caretaker attends with child
• Rules! Children who watch Jurassic World are scary at zoos!
• Small class size
• Use several volunteers to cover wide age and ability gaps
Class Format

- **Setup:** Fidget toys to entertain
- **Group time:** Introduce the topic
- **Station time**
  - Volunteers run stations, kids rotate through
  - More individual time with students
  - Break up groups into age/ability levels and it will be easier to adjust teaching strategy to each child
  - Visit a related Zoo exhibit
Pilot

• Wrote a simple class about invertebrates and piloted it at the Pingree Center (Community partnerships!!!!)
  – It went better than I initially thought

• Presented program and observed children at the Braille Challenge
Train Staff and Volunteers

Use online resources and others to create training program for volunteers to help with the class

– Important to note that program would not work if I did it by myself
Pilot Year 2015

• Projected: Four classes for a total of 40 students, done on the side while also running summer camp
  – Emailed everyone everywhere, in particular Help Me Grow Utah, who put it out on their list serves

• Actual: 16 classes, 160 students, plus outreach and onsite to SPED classrooms

• Full-time position

• 2016 YTD: 1100+ SPED students
Funding and Revenue

While the classes themselves don’t always bring in much revenue (we keep them low-cost), they bring in funding and interest from other sources:

• So far nearly $25,000 in additional funding, mostly from new sources
• More positive community relationship
Expansions since Pilot Year

• Deaf/Hard of hearing, developmentally delayed, Preschool age inclusive classes
• Sensory backpacks for guest checkout
• Half-day summer camp
• Website accessibility
  – Start by making an inventory of what you have and add to it. Even if people don’t make use of what you have, people feel more welcome.
Therapeutic Techniques

No longer just teaching kids about reptiles, but using the animals to teach life skills

• Focus on developmental milestones
• Healthy diets, exercise, hygiene and medicine, etc.
• Volunteers with from Pingree Center
  – Wearing shirts, nametags
  – Learn about animals, read maps
  – Complete tasks, interact with keepers and staff
  – Report what they did and learned
  – Learning job skills
Start Where You Can

• Backpacks and websites go a long way
• *The fact that you try makes your institution a safe place for people with diverse needs*
• Keeps you relevant in the community
• Community relevancy is *everything* in long-term sustainability