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Full STEAM Ahead: Education Students Develop Custom Exhibit Proposals for Herreshoff Marine Museum

Interactive exhibits combine sailing basics with lessons in science, technology, engineering, art and math

A model of the Reliance, winner of the 1903 America’s Cup, currently on exhibit at the Herreshoff Marine Museum Image Credit: Herreshoff Marine Museum

November 13, 2015 | Sabrina Polin '17

BRISTOL, R.I. – Collaborating with Bristol’s Herreshoff Marine Museum, six education students brought STEAM education to life by developing exhibit-based lessons geared toward children visiting the museum. Their goal? To make the Herreshoff Marine Museum more accessible to younger generations.

Through a special topics education course titled “STEAM Into Maritime Topics,” Adjunct Education Professor Sara Donaldson enlisted her class to help the museum become more student-oriented. STEAM education emphasizes the interconnection of science, technology, engineering, the arts and math.
A nonprofit institution that commemorates the legacy of the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company – builders of many legendary America’s Cup defenders and a host of sleek yachts – the museum currently is filled bow to stern with actual and model historic maritime treasures intended to educate and inspire. In recent years, however, museum administrators have expressed concern that the presentation of the manufacturing and sailing history is too dense and hard to digest for young visitors.

“The ultimate goal of this partnership is two-fold: one is to help meet the education needs of this organization, and the other is to give our RWU students a practical application of STEAM education and lesson planning,” Donaldson says. “We’re hoping that the student projects will make the museum a more practical place to bring young people to get excited about sciences and the history of boat-making.”

But before the students could dive into their projects, they had to learn the ropes of sailing and the science behind it. The class participated in U.S. Sailing’s Reach Initiative educator course, a daylong program that utilizes sailing as an educational platform to train teachers to implement nautical lessons steeped in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math). In addition to participating in hands-on activities that helped inspire their museum lesson plans, the students also earned Reach STEM certification.

With their feet wet in the sailing curriculum, the students – Maia Lloyd, Sara Heath, Michelle Milner, Katie DeBlois, Emily Pandiscio and Mary Collins – visited the museum to explore the existing exhibits, speak with the directors and staff about their needs, and identify potential areas of improvement. They then developed three interconnected projects to support the museum’s exhibits: a brochure, a scavenger hunt and an activity table.
The brochure simplifies the museum’s existing pamphlet with information that children, parents and teachers can more easily digest. Scannable QR codes in the brochure provide links to additional information to take back to the classroom or home.

The scavenger hunt introduces “Forgetful Captain Finn,” and enlists children’s help to find the captain’s lost belongings, which are placed conveniently around the museum to introduce them to the artifacts and their significance.

The last item on the scavenger hunt game leads to the activity table, complete with a water box on top and drawers containing lesson plans. Here, children are invited to explore concepts from buoyancy and boatbuilding to measuring wind speeds, among other activities.

“STEAM education is teaching kids how science, technology, engineering, arts and math all tie together,” says sophomore biology and education major Sara Heath. “Our projects let them see this for themselves as they begin to connect different characteristics of other fields together.”

Heath and her classmates recently presented their project ideas to museum administrators and received high praise for the ways in which they identified and improved upon the exhibits, according to Donaldson. The students say their projects are practical and can be executed in a number of
different ways according to the museum’s preference.

Equipped with these innovative concepts to supplement the existing exhibits, the Herreshoff Marine Museum now has the opportunity to move full steam ahead to launch a more student-centered experience. Museum staff have invited the six RWU students to return in a volunteer capacity, where they could continue their efforts.