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LINDENWOOD STUDENTS GET REAL EXPERIENCE INTERNING AT SAINT LOUIS ZOO

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By Kat Townsend

The Saint Louis Zoo is nationally recognized for their success as one of the only free, accredited zoos in the United States and their persistent commitment to wildlife conservation and education. So, it was no surprise when they announced their plans to expand in 2018. This expansion kicked off after the purchase of 425 acres of land in North St. Louis County. For Missouri residents, the biggest questions were how the zoo planned to develop their new land and what influenced their choice of location. This new campus is underway in unincorporated Spanish Lake, seemingly quite far away from the rest of the zoo. This decision is not without reason, as this area is full of native wildlife. As the Saint Louis Zoo expands their conservation outreach, they intend to increase the focus on the ecosystems that exist right here in our own backyards. A vital part of efficiently and responsibly developing this area is understanding where the wildlife is by mapping the land and the species that live there. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) is one of the most useful tools in analyzing geographical data and mapping out our world, and familiarity with GIS is quickly becoming a sought-after skill in careers of all disciplines. Lindenwood University students Meg Gold and Austin Blakeslee had the opportunity to participate in the zoo's GIS internship and play an instrumental role in mapping the new campus.

Meg Gold, who is set to graduate this May, was the zoo's first GIS intern. She is a majoring in biology with plans to work in conservation. The work Meg contributed was vital for mapping the boundaries, roadways, and zones of the new campus. She explains that she also plotted distribution data for several animal species and habitat types present there, and that the goal of her project was to create visuals representing this data to assist with planning which areas could safely be developed, and which areas should be preserved. Recalling her experience, Meg says she loved creating the zones and seeing her map come together at the end of her project. "It felt like I had created something valuable because that map was used to make decisions on a very large, expensive scale." A few weeks after the completion of her maps, the decision to announce the park's new name and publicize plans to move forward with the project were solidified. Formerly referred to as the North Campus, this area is now becoming the Saint Louis Zoo WildCare Park.

Austin Blakeslee, another biology major planning to graduate this May, took on the task of expanding upon Meg's work after her internship with the zoo was completed. "I took over Meg Gold's work from the previous semester with them and she did a really good job with her work," he described to me. "I took what she did a step further." Austin says that his map focused more on working as a tool for the zoo's team members to efficiently recognize where the animal species and their corridors are established. As Meg had previously mentioned, it was important for administrators who were making decisions to know which areas of the park to conserve and what areas to build on. To do this effectively and with consideration to established ecosystems, it was important for the interns to identify which areas were of most importance to the species present. Austin also elaborated on what taking on this role meant to him, stating that, "My favorite part about participating in this internship was doing something that felt like I was helping the local ecosystem... I think very highly of the Saint Louis Zoo and what they do for the community and for animals."

Meg and Austin both agreed that their time at Lindenwood University gave them the preparation and skillset they needed to succeed in their internship positions. Austin says that he discovered GIS courses at Lindenwood in his junior year, and he and Meg both credit Professor Tara Vansell for showing them the value of map making. Meg insists the LU exemplified quality leadership by connecting her with Professor Vansell who she says has been, "absolutely instrumental in my success as a student the past two years as well as providing me with opportunities and resources to continuously learn and grow." Both students will be graduating with a GIS certificate.

COVID-19 has put some delays on the development of WildCare Park, but administrators expect the park to be ready for public viewing by as early as 2026. The Saint Louis Zoo plans to continue conducting biological studies of the species present in the new campus, and the focus of this area will be on conservation of native species, education, and providing members of the community opportunities to interact with the outdoors in a way that is safe for humans and animals alike. The Earth is ever-changing and human expansion is becoming more complex. It can often be difficult not to feel overwhelmed by the work that needs to be done to conserve the planet and develop responsibly. It is the recognition of these complications that has increased the need for mapping and data collection. Organizations of every field are acknowledging their impact and searching for people who have these skills, so careers in GIS are expanding quickly. Lindenwood University has given students a unique advantage by providing access to classes in Geographical Information Systems that will prepare them for careers of all types. Students pursuing any degree may also obtain their GIS certificate at LU. Meg and Austin were able to gain Real Experience while participating in causes they are passionate about. They both agree that they have a sense of pride for what they have accomplished and how their work will contribute to conservation efforts in the future.