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## An Advanced Inquiry Program Graduate's Look Back

by Shasta Bray

The Zoo congratulates all of its recent graduates of the [Advanced Inquiry Program](#) (AIP)! Did you know you can earn your Master's Degree at the Zoo? Applications for the next year's cohort are due on February 28.

Here is what one of our 2015 graduates, Faith Hilterbrand, has to say about the influence the AIP program has had on both her personal and professional life.

**Guest blogger:** Faith Hilterbrand (AIP-CZBG '15)

Have you ever had the feeling of being in just the right place, at just the right time? I had been a junior high science teacher for seven years when Cincinnati Zoo's Master's program with Miami University's *Project Dragonfly* appeared in my email. I skimmed it, flagged it and thought "I'll check this out later." So there it was, every day when I opened my email, and I finally gave it the attention it deserved. As I began reading, idea after idea popped into my head and suddenly I was excited to apply.

Upon acceptance into the Advanced Inquiry Program (AIP) at the Cincinnati Zoo, a new challenge was thrown my way as I took a new position teaching high school life sciences. I mean if you are going to test new waters, you may as well dive in!

The AIP quickly taught me how long it had been since I had felt the pressure of being a student. I had to learn how to find balance while also still producing work that I was proud of at my job and in the classroom. I often felt just like my students when faced with a new assignment, which helped me to be a better, more compassionate teacher. The class meetings held at the Cincinnati Zoo were a time for learning and enthralling experiences, getting to see the animals up close and personal, but more importantly, I received support from classmates and instructors. It was encouraging to know others felt as I did, and the collaborative approach to the coursework made a more significant impact on myself and each of our communities. The focus on inquiry, scientific experimentation, and technical writing were all skills that were developed due to the coursework in the AIP and made me a more effective science teacher in preparing my students for their next academic step.

What I was not prepared for was the change it would evoke in my career aspirations and personal goals.

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Learning about the Zoo's American burying beetle reintroduction project

The Advanced Inquiry Program has served as the cornerstone of change for my professional life. The most amazing aspect is that I had zero intentions of that when I began the program.

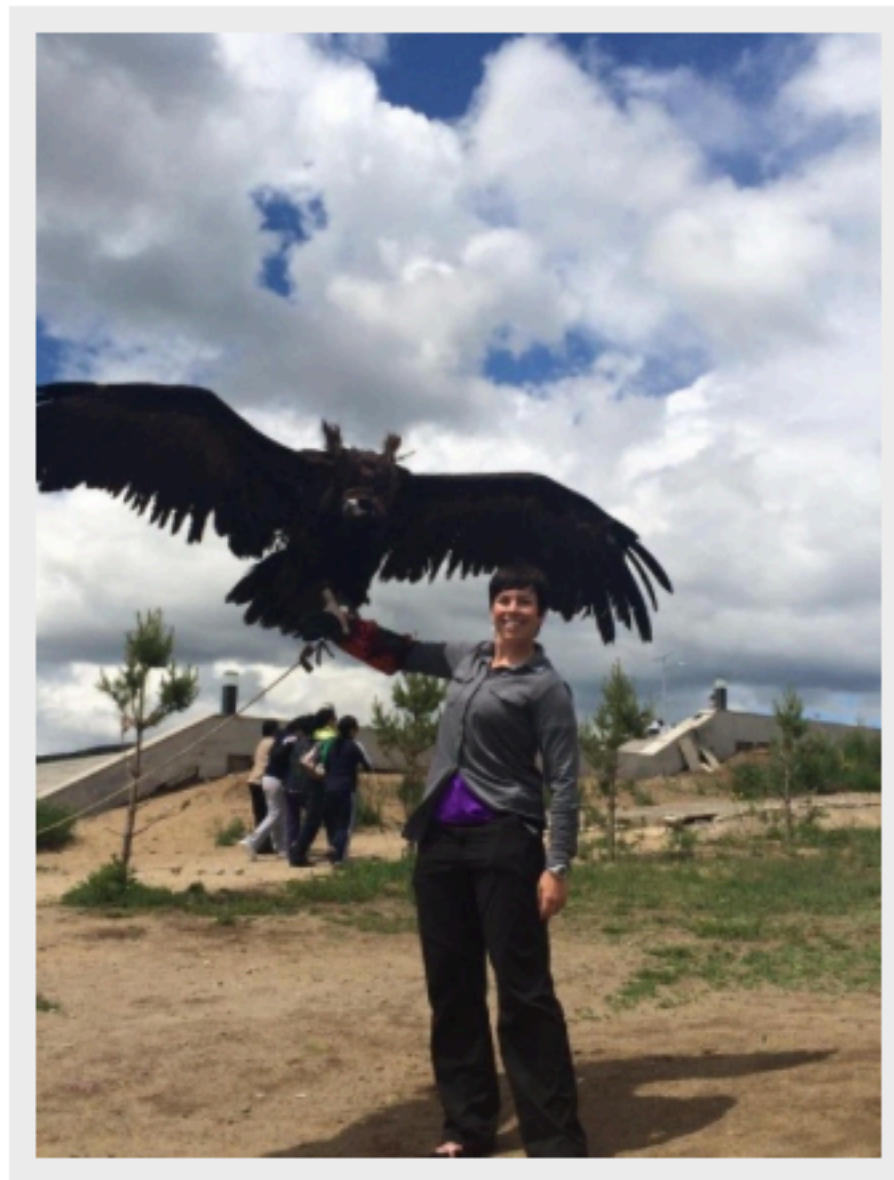
The instructors and classmates that I was exposed to in *Dragonfly*, both at the Cincinnati Zoo and in online courses, were the source of inspiration that began to challenge my previously conceived career notions. Suddenly, I was surrounded by people with a variety of ages, experiences, current work positions, and geographic locations, and I gained the courage to step outside the typical predetermined teaching path. As I became acquainted with fellow *Dragonflyer's*, I realized my own desire for professional growth and change.



Presenting results from a wetland inquiry with fellow AIP students

That is the beauty of the Advanced Inquiry Program – I was able to tailor my learning to meet my professional needs and open new doors in the future. I travelled the world, created my own internship, and gained invaluable knowledge and networking opportunities that connected education with conservation. I knew moving forward that my teaching background would prove instrumental in taking the fork in my career path instead of staying the course. As I have taken a year to reflect, explore,

staying the course! As I have taken a year to reflect, explore, and dream of my next position, it is all the people associated with the AIP and Project *Dragonfly* that have encouraged and challenged me to follow my own path.



Meeting a cinereous vulture following a field course in Mongolia

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