

Final Assignment IDEA Cohort Project

Project Title: Accessible Nature at MBGNA

Organization: Matthaei Botanical Garden and Nichols Arboretum

Why did you pick your project?

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum (MBGNA) recognizes that botanical gardens and arboreta are more than stewards of water and land; we foster moments of reconnection, healing, and so much more. Spaces that encourage connection to the natural world should be accessible and inclusive for everyone regardless of each person's disability and energy level.

Improving accessibility for current and future public users and staff became a leadership priority after an initial consultation with the University of Michigan's ADA Coordinator in the Fall of 2021. MBGNA staff that participated in the IDEA Cohort selected *Accessible Nature at MBGNA* as the organizational project for multi-year improvements with intentional planning and partnerships. *Accessible Nature at MBGNA* aims to center people with disabilities to inform practices, programs, and space improvements at MBGNA to improve the experience of people with disabilities and, ultimately, all users.

What is changing because of your project?

MBGNA has started to build relationships with UM Adaptive Sport; the UM Council for Disability Concerns; and the Disability Network of Washtenaw, Monroe, and Livingston Counties to continue improving accessibility at MBGNA. With these partnerships, we plan to develop a multi-year strategic plan with tiered improvements to move MBGNA beyond ADA compliance into a disability-friendly space. Currently, there are several immediate and near-future changes:

Immediate changes to MBGNA include:

- Improving the MBGNA Accessibility page such as developing and distributing Sensory Tips Document Guides and creating MBGNA Video Walkthroughs
- Providing Cultural Accessibility training to MBGNA staff, volunteers, and students
- Updating technology in the MBGNA auditorium
- Updating the Personal Room and purchasing different items
- Working with facilities to purchase more accessible seating

Near future changes include:

- Improving Accessibility at Nichols Arboretum, School for Environment and Sustainability Master Project, (Feb 2023 - April 2024) - A team of masters students will assess and report on existing barriers, suggest improvements, and where possible, implement solutions to augment accessibility at the Arboretum
- Supporting programming led by the Disability Network Washtenaw Monroe Livingston
- Revising wheelchair offerings and purchasing wheelchair attachments

- ADA+ Consulting with Disability Network Washtenaw Monroe Livingston
- Implementing Disability Awareness training into the professional development calendar and onboarding processes for new staff

Who are you making the change for?

We want to make this change *with* our local disability community and other visitors with disabilities to ensure a positive experience and move towards an ally organization. It is crucial that we continue to center disabled voices beyond the development into the implementation and evaluation phases. This will assure that able-bodied people are not centered and informing programs, processes, and procedures for people with disabilities but, instead, we create space for our partners to share their visions and interests to work together.

What was your approach?

Early on, MBGNA developed an IDEA Cohort sub-committee to move this project along in the organization. Committee members included the DEI Manager, Horticulture Lead, UM ADA Coordinator, and two undergraduate students.

Prior to the first sub-committee meeting the DEI Manager worked with MBGNA staff to document the history of MBGNA Accessibility efforts. Our timeline captured efforts from 2003 to 2018. Additionally, the DEI Manager compiled resources and notes on disability advocacy in museums and gardens. Both documents were shared with the sub-committee members to familiarize ourselves with MBGNA and national efforts.

The sub-committee identified UM departments through which to seek experiential feedback and open the door for collaborations (if interested). The ADA Coordinator scheduled the meeting with the UM Council for Disability Concerns for February 2023. Our [agenda](#) included an overview of MBGNA, the intent behind the project, and an opportunity for questions and feedback.

In parallel, members of the sub-committee secured faculty and master's students from SEAS (UM's School of Environment and Sustainability) to build accessibility assessments for the Arboretum into their curriculum for Spring 2023 - the findings of which are only now becoming available.

Now we are working with several partners to expand programming and assess MBGNA. We are working to draft shared goals, identify opportunities for collaborative programming, and find ways to support one another.

What were the challenges you faced (expected and/or unexpected) and how did you work through them?

As the inaugural cohort, it was communicated early on that we needed to develop a project but the expectations were unclear. Initially, we wrote the cohort project charter to state that our plan was to collaboratively engage the local disability community.

We assumed that we'd be able to get this project charter drafted and initiate collaborations to help MBGNA reach our desired outcomes. However, by the nature of our project, we did not begin with a collaborative process. Our approach changed in December 2022. We recognized that Fall was a busy time but we needed to revisit our approach. The ADA Coordinator guided us to approach our request by recognizing our mistake, naming it, and finding ways to move forward. She facilitated a connection with the UM Council for Disability Concerns and we were given time to share a presentation, gather experiential feedback, and developed a preliminary list of improvements and things to consider.

What were your biggest takeaways/lessons learned?

MBGNA's biggest takeaways and lessons serve as reminders for continuous IDEA work:

1. **Patience and Flexibility.** Participating as a cohort member, we are on a timeline connected to the program but when engaging in intentional change with partnerships, patience, and flexibility are crucial. Patience for oneself, especially as we're learning about our biases and the world around us, and working to build relationships to respectfully enter spaces with individuals who have different lived experiences. Patience for everyone learning or unlearning around us. And flexibility because we may have goals or a vision in place, but identifying the appropriate resources and developing shared priorities will take time and shift as we uncover unanticipated barriers.
2. **Collaborations must center the Disabled Community.** Throughout our initial search on accessibility work at MBGNA we found efforts from the early 2000 to improve transportation accessibility. While this effort is categorized under accessibility, access to the gardens is marginally enhanced. As we look at our larger organization and think about our physical spaces and programming, our goal is to do better than compliance. Creating a disability-friendly botanical garden requires consultation from individuals with various disabilities to inform changes that are truly inclusive.

What resources did you use or would you recommend?

General disability awareness resources:

- [Student IDEA Board Final Report](#) (2019), University of Michigan
- [All In! Accessibility in the National Service Parks](#), 2015-2020
- [General Tip Sheet for Visiting the United States Botanic Garden](#)
- [The Disabled Hiker's Guide to Western WA and OR](#)
 - [Spoon Rating System](#) - Disabled Hikers
- [Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design](#)

For Social Guides and Accessibility Page updates:

- Longwood Gardens - [Accessibility](#) and [Social Guide](#)
- NYBG - [Accessibility Map](#) and [Social Guide](#)
- National Botanic Gardens Glasnevin [Social Guide](#)
- UM Museum of Natural History - [Social Guide](#)
- [Guidelines For Providing Trail Information To People With Disabilities](#), 2020, Access Recreation

What would you have done if you were to go back and do things differently?

Our learning experience was beneficial. It's hard to pinpoint something to change because our outcome has been fruitful. From a programmatic lens, MBGNA should have invited more staff members to participate, some of the conversations were beneficial and would have bolstered IDEA competencies in the workplace. Moving forward, the plan is to incorporate the sessions into the MBGNA Community Conversations calendar to engage staff, students, and volunteers to engage in IDEA conversations for professional and personal development.

From a project perspective, creating the sub-committee earlier in the program would have allowed for more collaboration and participation from staff, UM constituencies, and external partners. Additionally, meeting with cohort members engaging in a similar project and setting regular touchpoints would be great. The inaugural IDEA cohort included other amazing gardens and staff who have done accessibility work. Connecting with them earlier would have been beneficial. Several attempts were made to reach out and work across various gardens, but due to time and capacity constraints, connections were slow to form. MBGNA is proud of the work accomplished during this cohort; we set a solid foundation to further engagement in the accessibility space.

What advice would you give others?

Once a topic is selected don't jump into recreating the wheel. Approaching the project through a research lens with a literature review and historical analysis of the organization (focused on the topic) will help paint a holistic picture of your efforts.

Take advantage of the cohort space and build relationships with other garden professionals (especially if you are new to botanic gardens or a young professional)! Utilizing our small cohort and project groups to build connections is perfect! It gives an opportunity to build relationships with people you will regularly see.

What's next for you?

MBGNA will continue to pursue our immediate and future changes and work to develop a pilot program that is disability-centered. We hope to maintain relationships with our garden colleagues, as well as utilize and distribute resources with the MBGNA staff to bolster their IDEA competencies. We recognize that IDEA work is ongoing and will not end soon. We hope to create evaluations for our users to provide feedback for continuous improvement.