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EIU Education Majors, Neoga Sixth-Graders Learn from Each Other

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What started as a simple research project for Neoga sixth-graders has blossomed into a mutually beneficial partnership with Eastern Illinois University education majors.

The 54 middle school students spent Wednesday, Oct. 1, on the EIU campus, with activities including researching planets at Booth Library, visiting the observatory and finding six campus landmarks using GPS technology with help from Mattoon High School students.

It all started earlier this year when Neoga teacher Donna Kastl, an EIU graduate, contacted the EIU Department of Early Childhood, Elementary and Middle Level Education for assistance in teaching her students to research space exploration at Booth Library.

The department agreed to help with the library visit, but it wanted to do even more. EIU faculty member Dan Carter and the 22 students in his "instructional methods" class were quick to see the benefits to a partnership, and they got to work planning a full day of activities.

All of the students in Carter's class volunteered their time for the project.

"Although this particular activity is new for our department, it is another example of how we believe in being responsive to our constituents and providing our students with integrative learning experiences," said Joy Russell, department chair.

The partnership actually began on Sept. 24, when the EIU students went to Neoga to meet the sixth-graders, breaking the ice with a scavenger hunt and a lesson on how to use a book for research.

"Our trip to Neoga helped establish rapport and trust with the students, hopefully leading to more effective learning and cooperative spirit," Carter said.

Wednesday's events were planned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of NASA. Each group of sixth-graders is researching a different topic, including the Apollo missions, the first walk in space and the International Space Station.

The students spent most of the morning in Booth Library, with the sixth-graders learning how to determine good sources for their papers, how to find those sources, and how to arrange their research.

Carter's brother Mike Carter, a science teacher at Mattoon High School, brought six of his students who plan to be teachers. The high schoolers helped with a moon-phase project in the morning, and



Neoga sixth-graders, aided by EIU education majors, use GPS units to locate their next destination during a campus tour.



A Mattoon High School student helps Neoga sixth-graders read GPS units as they walk through EIU's Library Quad.

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then led the GPS exploration in the afternoon.

In assuming the teacher role, each EIU student gained invaluable experience in honing their leadership, management and teaching skills. "Each of them is interacting back and forth between student and teacher," Dan Carter said of all participants.

"A lot of good hands-on experiences are happening," said sixth-grade teacher Carol Smith.

Kirk Hacker, another sixth-grade teacher, said he was proud that his students were learning even outside of the classroom. "It's nice to get them out of town and help them get something different from their usual day-to-day activities," Hacker said.

The Neoga teachers said that although the experience was great for teaching their students the basics of research and space exploration, there were greater lessons being taught, including the fact that a college education is accessible for each of them.

"We constantly tell them, 'You can go to college. You can be whatever you want to be,'" Kastl said. "It's such a neat opportunity for us."

Visiting Booth Library was one of the highlights for sixth-grader Kaleb Yurs. "It blew my mind," he said.

Booth Library was also a high point for Trentin Sheehan, another sixth-grader, who said he'd been on campus before, but only in one building. He was enjoying getting a better look at the rest of campus, and now he's pretty sure he'll return to campus as a student in seven years.

"It kind of helped me make up my mind," said Sheehan.

All of the sixth-grade teachers are EIU graduates, as are MHS teacher Mike Carter and EIU faculty member Dan Carter. And now, several Neoga students are likely planning to join their ranks in the future.

"Most of these kids said they'd never been to Eastern," said one EIU student assisting with the project. "I'm from a small town, and I know how it is to think, 'Oh, college is so far away. Only Chicago kids go to college.' Everything I do, they want to copy me, so hopefully they'll try to go to college."