



2023

WWU Spring Block Assistant

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Recommended Citation

Harper, Zoe, "WWU Spring Block Assistant" (2023). *College of the Environment Internship Reports*. 141.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/cenv_internship/141

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Spring Block 2023 Teaching Assistant

Organization Worked For: CENV

Student Name: Zoe Harper

Internship Dates: 3/28/23 6/9/23

Faculty Advisor Name Nick Stanger

Department ENVS



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STUDENT SIGNATURE

Handwritten signature of Zoe Harper in blue ink.

DATE: 6/6/23



Spring Block Internship 2023

Introduction:

The best way that I can describe Spring Block is as a knowledge exchange, even that term barely does it justice. I've spent the past two quarters preparing for, and helping my peers prepare for a field school on John's Island, W̱TÁEMEN, in cooperation with both the Lummi and WSÁNEĆ nations. In preparation students and faculty created a curriculum that included not only lessons, but risk management protocol, housing accommodations, schedules and food plans for each of the trips. The final product of these months of preparation was a four day experience that is almost beyond words, I'll try my best to capture it.

Spring Block has changed my life. Both through my initial participation as a student in 2022, to now as my facilitation as a TA in 2023, this program has touched me in so many ways. Going into this experience last year I had merely expected to learn my way around the EE field. While I achieved that, I also opened my eyes to how intrinsically intertwined social justice is within environmental education, I learned what it means to support the indigenous communities of this land, I made more friends and connections than I could have ever imagined, and my connection to place grew alongside my knowledge of it and my confidence to exist in it. I couldn't be more thankful.

Writing a report about an internship such as this one is a daunting task. Where I imagine most internship positions have a myriad of tactile work that they can look back on, the tactile work associated with my role...exists; though its hidden beneath layers of interpersonal relationships, songs, conflict, and bird calls that are all still resonating in my mind surrounding this experience. In this report I hope to encompass all of this work, both tactile and more elusive.

Goals of the College:

Western Washington University's College of the Environment's mission statement is as follows:

*"The College of the Environment **addresses today's environmental issues** and prepares tomorrow's **interdisciplinary problem solvers**. We accomplish this mission by integrating outstanding educational programs, faculty-student collaboration, applied research, and professional and **community service**."*

Within this statement I've bolded the goals that I've been able to touch on within my work. I would argue it's in the nature of Spring Block to address environmental issues through an interdisciplinary lens, and often that comes out in the way of service. I will expand on all of this later on.

Personal Learning Goals:

My personal learning goals for this experience were intentionally sprawling. I knew that even though I had done the program before, that trying to predict the experience was going to be impossible. Such is the nature of Spring Block. In brief, they were as follows:

- ★ Learn more about the facilitation and backend work of SB.
 - Specifically the work surrounding the funding, logistics, risk management, and emotional safety.
- ★ Learn how to best support students on the emotional labor front and then implement it.

- ★ Learn more about the communities we worked with and how best to support them.
- ★ Be more intentional about relationship building with these communities.

My intention with the rest of this report is to expand on how I met, or tried to meet both the goals of the college as well as my personal learning goals. In order to try and attain the tactile nature of my work, which was often hard to pin down, I've included pictures from my time to go along with each goal section.

Facilitation & Backend Work:

Though officially I've been registered for a spring quarter only internship, I've been preparing for Spring Block since late fall of this year. Most of that early work surrounded planning meetings, and set up for recruitment.

Risk Management: My work with this data entry was my first step in learning more about the detailed nature of risk management within Spring Block. After applicants were selected, risk work started to look like logging medical and logistical paperwork, and ensuring it was all entered into secure spreadsheets that we would be able to use for the rest of the quarter. My professor Gene Myers is the risk guru of the block, and I learned this meticulous important work from him.

Though risk management can be as simple as entering paperwork, or creating an itinerary for an upcoming trip, it more often looks like a set of matrices outlining all of the possible things that could go wrong, and how we will address them. My work on this front came also in the form of creating the risk management plans for our work in the kitchen, as well as heading up kitchen facilitation. As a way of helping to support and serve the communities that we worked with, blockies and faculty worked to feed all of our partners. Having an industrial kitchen at our disposal made that work much easier, but arguable much more dangerous as well.

Having worked in many industrial kitchens over my life, I was able to pull from those experiences to build a comprehensive kitchen cleanliness and safety plan which was implemented into our larger curriculum.

Planning and Funding: The second step in planning this food service was ingredient research and purchasing, as well as budgeting for such purchasing. My professor Nick Stanger (Hi Nick!) is the planner of our group, and while he is good at delegating some of those tasks to TA's, the budget and learning exactly how it functions is one goal that I didn't quite meet within this process.

Buying food for what we were expecting to be upwards of 100 people was quite the feat. I hope that the picture illustrates the incredible amount of planning that went into this incredible task!



Student Emotional Support:

The emotional support aspect of this position was the one aspect that I knew for certain I would be tackling as a TA. It was this work in particular that encouraged me to become a facilitator to begin with. Spring Block seems to inspire conflict, on all levels, I believe its due to the intense emotional connections that are formed through this program. Hurt happens, and can be hard to deal with when there is also so much work to be done. My goal, along with my fellow TA, Anna, was to try and mitigate as much of this emotional hurt as we could.

Our way of implementing this goal was to establish ourselves as peers with the blockies from the get go. This wasn't a big stretch considering that we were all the same age and many of us knew each other. But it was important to us to squander any big power differentials between us and the students. After that it was simply building trust, which with your peers just means making friends. That was the best part of being a TA.

I hold so much care for the people of this program, I was always making sure to tell them all that Anna and I were always available to talk and help with anything they may need. I felt proud every time I got pulled aside to have a chat, or Anna and I received a late night text from one of the blockies. I'm proud of the work they and I put in.

That's not to say that this quarter was without its faults on the emotional front. We definitely had some big hiccups, some of which, arguably, were necessary for learning. Within those moments that we weren't able to catch before disaster struck, Anna and I made sure to help facilitate the conversations that followed. Playing "student/professor liaison" proved also to be an essential part of this role.

Emotional mitigation is not something that I was formally taught at Western, the interdisciplinary skills that both Anna and I bring to the table are what pulled us through this navigation.



Intra-community relationship building:

Arguably the most daunting goal that I set for myself in this process was working on my relationship building with our partners. Talking to new people is not my strong suit, especially new adults. That aside, as I mentioned above, trust building is the basis of relationship building. It took a lot of trust on the side of W̱SÁNEĆ School Board, Whiteswan Environmental, and Whatcom Intergenerational High School to come out to W̱TÁEMEṈ. Building trust on our side looked like ensuring that all the logistics had been thought through for our partners so that they would have to do as little work as possible once they stepped foot on the Land.

For me personally, I helped by making sure food was ready to go at the correct times, and that there was more than enough food for everyone. One of my biggest takeaways in learning from and with our partners is the importance of food as a way to build trust. Unfortunately, this immense level of food and kitchen logistics left me stuck in the kitchen most days. Though I was more than happy to be facilitating that work, it left close to zero time to make new connections with our partners. I was remorseful on this front.

Though individual conversations were harder for me to achieve, I also know that a part of building trust is simply listening. Within this program there is much knowledge exchanged. Both the WWU students and each of our partners had dedicated times to teach lessons of their choosing. Getting to sit in on some of our partners lessons was a small way that I was able to build a semblance of a relationship. Starting each morning in circle with Protocol, learning about environmental injustices with WE, dancing with WSB in the big house, all of these were moments when I felt a part of building community.

There are two standout memories that I have from learning with our partners. One experience that I was so grateful for was learning about Cedar with an elder named SELIYE. Her gift of sharing this knowledge was what felt like an unfathomable kindness. After having studied her words in Saanich Ethnobotany I was beyond excited to get to talk with her. Secondly was something that Sadie Olson, co-founder of WE, said during one of her lessons. She said “tears are the strongest form of prayer”, this is really sticking with me. I’ve thought about those words every day since she said them, I’m grateful to her as well.



Lessons from Elsewhere:

Though my learning goals helped to guide me in finding the big lessons in this process, I learned countless smaller lessons outside of those goals that I look back on just as fondly.

I learned:

- ★ How many people will want two breakfast sausages in the morning.
- ★ How long it takes for a sea lion to decompose.
- ★ That a ferry reservation is different from paying for the ferry itself.
- ★ How to fold a cedar strip rose.
- ★ How numerous friendships can be formed through the magic of a softly sung campfire song.
- ★ How strong a connection to place can sometimes feel.
- ★ How to dance with immense joy.
- ★ How much the Land has changed me in the past year.

I am forever grateful to the Land, the WSÁNEĆ and Lummi Nations, my professors, my blockies, and all of my non-human relatives for making this experience as transformative as it was. I will forever look back on my final quarter fondly, perhaps the best final quarter there was. Even through writing this report I feel as though I've barely scratched the surface of what I've learned in this process, I have a feeling those words will take years to come to the surface, but I'm willing to wait. HÍSWŪKE.

