WWU AS Environmental Justice Program Intern

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Internship Title: Environmental Justice Program Coordinator

Organization Worked For: Office of ESP, Associated Students, WWU

Student Name: Natalie Harris

Internship Dates: 9/20/22 - 6/01/23

Faculty Advisor Name: Rebekah Paci-Green

Department: ENVS

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STUDENT SIGNATURE ____________________________

DATE: 5/17/23
Reflection on my Internship as the Environmental Justice Program Coordinator for the WWU AS ESP

By Natalie Harris
May 17th, 2023

Introduction

I remember when I found out I was getting this job. A few weeks after I had haphazardly applied online to a rapidly closing job listing, and after an interview I was overcaffeinated and under-slept for, Casey, my supervisor, called me and let me know I would be the Office of Environmental and Sustainability Programs’ (ESP) Environmental Justice Programming Coordinator for the following year. The news came as a relief, an honor, and I felt a sense of alignment after I hung up the phone. It was strangely late when he called, 8pm on a Friday or something like that, and I was journaling on the floor of my new living room before the phone rang. I had just moved in to the apartment, whose view and balcony I had completely to myself for the first month, and a beautiful late-summer sunset was streaming in through the windows. Knowing that I would have a job I was excited about, and finally a living situation in Bellingham which would be safe and consistent for my final year of college was like being able to take a deep breath for the first time in a long time. In that moment, likely spurred by the journaling I was already doing, I reflected on the three years I had spent here. For most of them I was unsure of myself, living in unsteady homes with unsteady people, and working hard at jobs and relationships that didn’t always seem to love me back. But that day, I felt that all my decisions and effort up to that point had gotten me to the right place.

I have always had this ability to rapidly shift from being a sunny, stars-aligning above my head type person to an I-have-made-a-grave-mistake-and-everything-is-falling-apart-all-the-time type person. I suppose that saying, “if you grew up in a burning house, you will think the whole world is burning,” fits well in this context. I soon started to feel that my job was burning down around me, but the struggles were not always imagined. The position was frustratingly independent at first. Casey gave little guidance as to what the real responsibilities of my role were, or what he and the hiring committee had envisioned for the position. I was also working in a one-person office, with only a disorganized Teams folder and some old posters on the walls to inspire me. Anyone who had worked with the previous ESP officer had graduated out along with him, and the stories I did hear were full of drama and conflict. What am I supposed to be doing here? was my near-daily question for the first few months. I quickly realized that I needed to define this job alone, and while I worked out what that meant I took on odd jobs and existing committee positions that didn’t really suit my role. The environmental justice programming coordinator role was meant to organize events around campus to increase student participation and knowledge on local environmental justice topics, though this wasn’t always clear at first. It was a steep learning curve
for me to figure out how to plan events, not sure of what events were feasible or desirable, so I took on a participatory role for my first few months of the job.

Non-Event Planning Duties

Because I was the only person in the ESP, I was the clear leader of the ESP but did not have the ESP director title. Despite this, I took on various roles of the director, a few of which were seats on committees. As a voting member of the Sustainability, Equity, and Justice Fund (SEJF) committee, I participated in biweekly meetings where we discussed incoming grant proposals. We saw proposals for many kinds of projects including travel to conferences for men of color in academia, film screenings on mental health in indigenous communities, work parties in environmental restoration for LEAD, and so many more. In the first few months, we approved nearly every grant we saw. SEJF had a surplus of money due to a deficit of proposals during the COVID years, so we were able to fund a wider range of projects. In addition to voting on the proposals, it was also important for me to promote SEJF to clubs and students, so that they knew there was a funding body which wanted to support their ideas for community and personal academic and professional development. Along with other SEJF members, I helped get the word out about the grant to Western in a post-COVID era where so many were unaware of what Western had to offer to students. It ended up being a successful campaign – by spring quarter we had to be far more selective about which projects to fund because the volume of proposals increased rapidly. Things we considered were the cost and environmental impacts of travel to conferences. Was this the role of SEJF, to provide travel expenses, considering the environmental impact of travel? Many conferences were still approved, but a separate group of SEJF members began work on creating a template for conference and travel grants specifically, which should include carbon offsetting for their travel within their proposal from the get-go. We also wanted to make it easier for clubs to receive SEJF money and set up a streamlined approach for WWU clubs to apply for the grant. Most of these efforts increased SEJF’s ease-of-access to our priority groups and increased the awareness of SEJF overall. For many of the meetings with SEJF, I participated mostly as a listening member. It was intimidating to work with the SEJF committee at first, as most other members were faculty or well-establish sustainability advocates at Western who were very experienced in the field. I’m glad that I chose to listen, because I learned a lot about how to consider grants and funding requests. Who does it impact? Who does is not impact? What are the environmental benefits or damages? How can we make the spending of this proposal more efficient? So many questions were asked that my brain had not yet been trained to think about. It helped me in my own budgeting for our office and being able to prioritize projects in terms of cost and impact when we eventually began organizing Earth Week.

Another committee I voted on was the Legislative Affairs Council (LAC) committee. The LAC is the committee which writes the legislative documents for WWU students when they attend lobby day. The LAC was not always well-run. Committee members had strong disagreements with each other at times, and it was not always easy to write our asks of the legislature. But I learned skills here as well. I learned about the process of identifying senate and house bills and how to interpret their language, got practice with writing succinctly and persuasively to the legislature, and learned more about the things WWU students care about in politics. The LAC was a demanding committee which appeared to be a passion project for a select few. If I was doing it again, I would probably find someone else to replace me on this committee. My vote was important in terms of bringing a voice for sustainability and environmental justice in our asks of the legislature, but a majority of the hour and a half long weekly
meetings were squabbling over semantics. Within this committee, if nothing else, I learned to stay patient and not take work home with me. I think the LAC committee could be improved by stronger leadership and stricter assignment of roles on the committee. People who are passionate about Washington politics and advocating in the capital would be best suited for this committee, and I have discovered that this may not be me. Many times, I questioned the point of what we were doing at all. Some of the bills we advocated for had been on the docket for several years! What was this work achieving?

Beyond the committees, I also began working with the Student Ambassador at the Sustainability Engagement Institute (SEI). Cole Burke and I worked together to arrange monthly Sustainability Roundtables which were meant to act as a check in for clubs and students interested in sustainability around campus. I created informational materials, gave presentations on environmental justice topics around campus, designed the roundtable events and flow, and met with as many people as I could. While sitting on a chunk of cash in the ESP budget without much place to go, I helped fund the roundtables and tried to fund club efforts as well. I learned from legacy documents kept at SEI that the ESP had historically been a hub for all the sustainability clubs around campus, as well as the Outback and the Outdoor Center. The ESP director was often an advisor to clubs to help connect them with AS funding and other campus resources, and while late to the game, I did start trying to fulfill this role. As an advisor to clubs, I allocated ESP funding for small club projects like the Students for Climate Action march through Fairhaven (mainly transportation costs), and getting food drop off bins for the Dining Dollars Project. I also helped connect clubs to other resources and people I was aware of on campus, and tried to have quarterly meetings with the clubs to check in and see how I could help. The meetings were only semi-successful. I found a number of hurdles in the communication process – it is not always easy to get people to respond to an email – but overall I got to meet with most sustainability clubs at least once and offer what help I could. Overall, I would regard this as a top priority of my job in the ESP, and perhaps the biggest failure this year. Had I known more clearly that this was something the ESP did at the beginning of the internship, maybe I could have gotten a head start on introducing myself to clubs in an advisory capacity. But I mostly blame it on COVID. Many people I met had never heard of the ESP before, and I attribute that to those quiet few years where the ESP did almost nothing (along with many others groups). No one knew that the ESP was a place you should go to for resources or help, and often stray students ended up at SEI before they came to the underground ESP office.

**Event Planning**

Steadily, I started to meet people through all these other tasks. As a voting member of the SEJF committee, a leader of monthly Sustainability Roundtables, and a co-author of a few of the legislative documents for lobby days, I met people who had a firmer vision for what this campus needed in terms of sustainability and justice. Meanwhile, in my classes, I began finding topics which sparked a little fire in me. Reproductive justice, the body as politically contested space, art and storytelling in activism, and the subjugation of BIPOC and women as a necessary mechanism of capitalism were all things I wanted to explore so much more than I had room for in our fast-paced 10-week curriculums. I hoped that I could bring some of the things that I wanted to talk about to my job. So, after a fall quarter full of helping
other people orchestrate their own events, I decided to put on my own in February. With the help of a community organizer who had an existing network of artists and vendors to call on, I hosted our first art market on Valentine’s Day and raised about $750 for the Lummi Island Heritage Trust (LIHT). Many of the vendors were students who practiced crochet, upcycling, jewelry making, graphic design, baking, and more in their spare time. The art market was a space that celebrated artists around campus and invited people to support their fellow creative community members. It created stronger ties in the community and legitimized the work of many talented hobbyists, as well as the practice of hosting markets with small vendors. A tight community is a healthier community, and one who will protect each other and their local environment more than one that is disconnected and disparate. Since then, I have seen so many of the artists I had at that market organize their own markets and stands in yards, community centers, parks, and more. I believe that Bellingham is a bit brighter and more vibrant with more art on display.

The next major and all-consuming task was to plan Earth Week. We hired the Earth Week Coordinator, Erica, in January, and since then she has become one of my closest friends. Together, and along with the Earth Week committee, we planned two weeks’ worth of large and successful events. It was one of the most demanding jobs I have ever done. Many times, I would go to class from 8 to noon, and then to my office where I stayed through lunch and dinner. During the winter, when the sun set at 4:30 in the afternoon, I believe I was so vitamin D deficient that I would have overdosed on a single ray of sunshine if I ever saw one (there are no windows in our dungeon office). Had I been doing that job alone as I was in the fall, I would have surely collapsed in on myself. Hiring Erica was the best call I ever made, and the true scale of the task we set up for ourselves didn’t really sink in until we were entrenched in it and couldn’t pull out. During those months I sent hundreds of emails to vendors, musicians, and artists, and had several meetings a week with semi-interested interest groups. At times it was defeating and scary. Sending out a dozen “cold” emails gets to be exhausting when you realize how rarely you get a response back. Many of our ambitious ideas for entertainment or speaker engagements were met with failure, but it was good learning process because I figured out how to identify what is and isn’t feasible. I also learned a lot about writing professional emails. It was so challenging, but I can’t complain about it now. The night before every event during those two weeks was full of nerves and anxiety that were proved wrong the following day time and again. Our largest event, a panel on ecofeminism with guests from Intersectional Environmentalist, was so popular that we were pulling out chairs from storage throughout the whole thing to accommodate all the attendees. At Outback Unplugged, we had people stay past the scheduled end of the event just to hear our Fairhaven alumni keep telling stories and singing songs. And the most remarkable part of Earth Fair was the Student’s for Climate Action table, where they gave out completely free organic produce and fresh food to all who could make it. They lasted less than an hour, but we got to see dozens of pictures of students preparing their fresh produce in creative ways throughout the following week. There were so many moments of joy during the planning process and Earth Week itself, it wouldn’t really fit into a reflection all that well.

Outcomes & Assessment
I learned many skills and new things about myself during my time in this job. I learned how to quickly respond to an email, and I learned that muting notifications at home or in class is the only way to not work 24/7 at a job like this. I learned that I need people to talk to in order to stay motivated, and I learned that if there are not people around, I am able to drink a lot more cold brew than I thought I could. I learned that more than anything else, I am fulfilled by creating spaces for people to come enjoy life, art, nature, and each other. I also learned that doing justice-based work can be incredibly uncomfortable for me. I was faced with my own shortcomings and misunderstandings many times while with people who knew more than I did, had more experience than me, or just seemed better equipped to participate in conversations about justice, gender, race, or environmentalism. I had many, many moments of feeling that I was not the right person to be doing justice work or trying to facilitate these conversations. Even now, as I look forward to graduating with a bachelor's in environmental justice and community resilience, I sometimes doubt that this is the right field for me, or that I have anything worthwhile to say here. One challenging moment does stand out to me. At the IE panel, one of the panelists condemned the word “ecofeminism,” said she hated it, and while I know no one necessarily turned and looked at me when she said that, I felt embarrassed that I had proposed the concept for the panel at all. I don’t disagree with her – feminism is historically white and straight and can carry, I guess, an insufferable air around it. It made me realize that I may not yet have the language or focus to contribute in a meaningful way in justice work. I have felt a similar way in many of the other justice-oriented spaces I have been able to participate in. While I walk away ultimately feeling grateful for everything I learned, I am also looking forward to some space from this field. In justice work there can be a lot of policing and shame, and sometimes it seems counterintuitive to the effort to create an uplifting learning environment. I have had endless valuable conversations over the course of this job, and I am utterly exhausted.

I think it is okay to realize that something is not for you, because it can also reveal what is. I think justice work is vital, and the ways I was pushed this quarter revealed to me where I enjoy a challenge and where I don’t. What I loved about this job and the ways I found myself invigorated, inspired, and energized far outnumbered the ways I didn’t. I loved working with musicians, artists, entrepreneurs, and educators. I loved all the contacts I made and feeling more connected to Bellingham through them. Once I got surer of myself and my ability to navigate the layered multitasking of event planning, I loved the freedom to work out a vision for an event and see it succeed. Seeing smiling people in a space I created is so, so rewarding. I would do this job again next year if I could, and I know I would do it so much better. I would be able to start strong and plan my events more quickly, already having a sense of where the trickiest parts are and what tends to get overlooked in the planning process. But as I wrap up my time at the ESP now, the ESP is also ending itself. Budget cuts throughout the university have not left the Associated Students untouched, and one of the bodies that needed to be dissolved was the ESP. I knew this when I started the job and thought that it would be my mission to save the ESP, but now I see it differently. We have worked out a transition plan with SEI, who is currently in a position to grow instead of shrink, so they can take on the role of Environmental Justice and Earth Week programming. The AS held these jobs for so long because event planning is what the AS is good at, but it would be stronger for the SEI to be the sole institute which handles environmentalism and sustainability around campus. This identifies them as the main hub for students to go to for all their sustainability needs, which wasn’t the case this past year. The SEI and ESP have had tumultuous relationships in the past, and while Cole and I did our best to not step on each other’s feet while working collaboratively, it
was not always clear whose job was what. Moving the jobs of the ESP to SEI will provide more clarity for students who want help on environmental projects.

To streamline the transition process, Erica and I are working on comprehensive legacy documents to help future event planners. When I started out I had no idea what I was allowed to do or even what I was really supposed to do, so in our document we’ll outline exactly what we got done and how. The learning curve of this job for those first few months is very steep. I hope that this document will shed some light on what an environmental justice programming coordinator should be equipped to do, along with some helpful ideas and tips. I’ll include the contacts I made who were most helpful, the events I planned which were the most successful, and the things I wish I had done differently. I had ideas for events which I thought were harebrained at first, like a Trashion Show (fashion show with clothes made of trash), that I know now were actually perfectly suited to my role as the programming coordinator. Ultimately, I think this transition will be to the benefit of the whole community, and we’ll do everything we can to make it a smooth one. That being said, no one can know how much work Earth Week is until they’re doing it, but if I could do it then I know our successors will be able to as well.

I am incredibly grateful for this job, I could not have imagined how much I would learn about myself throughout it. I graduate in a few weeks and am desperately scrambling to find a job in the field of environmentalism. What strikes me is that none of the jobs out there are the ones I just had. I would just stay and do it again if I could, at least the event planning parts. This job was incredibly unique in the freedom and creativity it allowed me to have, and I now know I will treasure that experience for the rest of my life. It is not often that you are granted a budget and the authority to really do whatever you want with it. I am walking away from this position with more confidence in myself, and a better sense of what I would like to do with a career. I know that my favorite parts of work are creativity, art, and talking to people, and I think those are things I can find. I think those are things which the pessimistic world of environmentalism needs. I hope to bring that sentiment to any job I end up working from here on out.
May 18, 2023

Dear Rebekah Paci-Green,

I am writing in my capacity as the supervisor for Natalie Harris, who this year filled the role of AS Environmental Justice Programming Coordinator very successfully and with great dedication. Natalie fulfilled all requirements and met all expectations of this position, which included planning several events for the campus community centered on the many facets of sustainability as well as serving as a representative on the Sustainability Equity and Justice Fund (SEJF) Committee and the AS Legislative Affairs Committee.

Natalie completed far more than 10 hours per week in the position, which would also be applied to her internship.

Natalie’s successful efforts to build connections within the sustainability community at Western and effective event planning skills resulted in several excellent events and a very huge Earth Week(s) celebration.

I have no hesitation in confirming that Natalie fully met all expectations for the position and related internship.

Feel free to reach out to me if you have questions or need for further information.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Casey Hayden, M.Ed.
Assistant Director of Student Activities & Media – WWU – 360-650-2489, [Casey.Hayden@wwu.edu]
## Appendix 2: Table of Duties and Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date(s) &amp; Commitment</th>
<th>With whom</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Equity and Justice Fund Committee</strong></td>
<td>Sep ‘22 – Jun ’23 Biweekly meetings</td>
<td>SEJF committee</td>
<td>Voting on grant proposals, advertising grant, offering logistical guidance to committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legislative Affairs Council</strong></td>
<td>Sep ‘22 – May ‘23 Weekly meetings</td>
<td>LAC committee</td>
<td>Writing legislative agendas, identifying bills to advocate for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Roundtables</strong></td>
<td>Oct ‘22 – May ‘23 Monthly Roundtables</td>
<td>Cole Burke, Student Ambassador (SEI)</td>
<td>Preparing and presenting informational materials on EJ, designing roundtable flow and agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Club Advisor</strong></td>
<td>Nov ‘22 – May ‘23 Monthly meeting per club</td>
<td>Solo</td>
<td>Connect sustainability clubs with contacts, financial and other resources, ideas, upcoming events, and any information they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Love the Environment Art Market</strong></td>
<td>14/2/23 2 months planning</td>
<td>Sofija Astral, Birdhouse Art Market &amp; LIHT</td>
<td>Contact vendors, reserve event space, pay for event services, establish vendor contracts, and ensure they have proper documentation, promote event, coordinate with charity, allocate donations from vendors to charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EARTH WEEK(s) – all following events are EW</strong></td>
<td>April 17 – April 28 2023</td>
<td>Erica Richardson, Earth Week Coordinator (ESP) &amp; Earth Week Committee</td>
<td>Scheduling, promoting, planning, funding, designing, hiring, more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slay Film Screening</strong></td>
<td>17/4/23</td>
<td>Julia Zahn</td>
<td>Mainly promotional. Assist Julia reserve space for screening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intersectional Ecofeminism Panel</strong></td>
<td>18/4/23</td>
<td>Erica Richardson, Gene Meyers, Intersectional Environmentalist</td>
<td>Hire musicians, reserve space, orchestrate event flow, coordinate with IE, write questions on ecofeminism for panel (not used), massive promotional endeavor, graphic design of posters, identify interest groups for separate meetings with IE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outback Unplugged Stories &amp; Music from the Farm</strong></td>
<td>19/4/23</td>
<td>Erica Richardson</td>
<td>Find willing &amp; musical alumni to perform (difficult), promote throughout Fairhaven, outback, CENV, set up outdoor space, order food, design collaborative art project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earth Fair</strong></td>
<td>21/4/23</td>
<td>Erica Richardson</td>
<td>Identify 35~ vendors and set up vendor contracts, work with Wendy to set up space and orchestrate flow of vendors and performers, hire 3 musical acts, various contingency plans for weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Coordinator(s)</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earth Day Volunteering Events</strong></td>
<td>22/4/23 – 23/4/23</td>
<td>NSEA, LEAD, City of Bellingham</td>
<td>Mainly promotional. Coordinate with various organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeds of Vandana Shiva Film Screening</strong></td>
<td>24/4/23</td>
<td>Stu Johnson, Outback Coordinator</td>
<td>Mainly promotional. Assist with identifying best possible film choice to match Outback priorities and mission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clothing Swap &amp; Repair</strong></td>
<td>25/4/23</td>
<td>Kait Schultz &amp; Ethan Granat, Coordinators (ZWW)</td>
<td>Promote, identify volunteers to help sew, reserve event space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Campus Tour</strong></td>
<td>26/4/23</td>
<td>Natalie Sacker &amp; Cole Burke, SEI</td>
<td>Mainly Promotional. Identify optimum timing based on Earth Week schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Action Plan Engagement Session</strong></td>
<td>26/4/23</td>
<td>Cole Burke &amp; Lindsay MacDonald, SEI</td>
<td>Promote and attend as advisors on SAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fire &amp; Flood Film Screening</strong></td>
<td>28/4/23</td>
<td>Allie Carr</td>
<td>Mainly promotional. Allie was a hands-off committee member.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix 3 – List of Acronyms Used**

- AS – Associated Students
- CENV – College of the Environment
- EJ – Environmental Justice
- ESP – Office of Environmental and Sustainability Programs
- EW – Earth Week
- IE – Intersectional Environmentalist
- LAC – Legislative Affairs Council
- LEAD – Learning, Environment, Action, Discovery WWU
- LIHT – Lummi Island Heritage Trust
- NSEA – Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association
- SEI – Sustainability Engagement Institute
- SEJF – Sustainability Equity and Justice Fund
- WWU – Western Washington University
- ZWW – Zero Waste Western