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Faculty Spotlight: Jennifer Tarlton of Environmental Science and Management

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Faculty Spotlight: Jennifer Tarlton of Environmental Science and Management

By Kai Cooper



The staff at Redwood Roots had the pleasure of interviewing faculty member Jennifer Tarlton from the Environmental Science and Management department at Humboldt State University. Jennifer is a longtime resident of Humboldt County, who values the connections cultivated in her own community. With a desire to help others, she earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from HSU. After graduating, Jennifer and her partner

took a six month road trip, which she defined as a monumental experience for her future decisions and outlook on the world. She then enrolled in Americorp where she began to focus more on the environment. Afterwards, Jennifer went to complete her masters in Environmental Education and Interpretation at Humboldt State. After graduating, she started working with Eureka City Schools implementing Service Learning programs in their K-12 classrooms.

This experience allowed her to find value in Service Learning and bring that knowledge to her future endeavors.

After some time in her position with Eureka City Schools, Jennifer was offered a faculty position at Humboldt State which she accepted and still holds today. Her time spent with nature, along with her experience with psychology, led to the question that influences her most, "What is the human relationship to the natural world and how can we make that relationship lead to more sustainable practices?" Tarlton has now been working as HSU faculty for approximately fourteen years. She teaches Environmental Science and Management, while also overseeing the Environmental Education and Interpretation concentration. All but one of her classes have a Service Learning or community-based learning component.

Jennifer's work with Americorp, Eureka City Schools, and Humboldt State University has provided her with a perspective that is quite valuable to modernizing education. There is no doubt that community-based learning is important to students and their relationships with their communities. "Service Learning provides a really interesting opportunity for mentorship and for really connecting students to faculty, to their college, and to their local community." These relationships create a sense of place for students, as well as a rise in student engagement. These concepts taught in class are applied in the real world, and according to Jennifer, "Community engagement allows students to engage with lifestyles that are different than their own."

"I want my students to feel really engaged with the academic content. And I think when you build in community-based projects, it takes their level of engagement to a new level." In regards to career

development, community-based learning provides students with hands-on learning experiences that build confidence when entering the workforce.

To Jennifer, the most challenging aspects of Service Learning are how time consuming it can be. The programs contain lots of moving parts, and she claims it is important to trust the process. This is an evolving practice, and it shows that, although there are lots of moving parts, the benefits outweigh the obstacles. This type of learning involves three main parties: faculty, students, and community partners. In order for all parties to communicate their goals, they must establish what they all hope to achieve through the semester. This informal agreement allows everyone to have clarity in regards to the expectations of the partnership.

Although there are sometimes difficulties with so many moving parts, Jennifer reiterates that students still manage to benefit long-term "There are still things that students pull out of the experience in order to be successful, but then translate into being a successful leader in their careers as well." These experiences help shape students' education and career paths, and community projects have led students to epiphanies. "They're like, oh, I don't actually like working with children, you know, and they'll change their majors and so I'm glad that I have that built in. So, before they get too far along, they've had an experience where then they can make that decision." It is important to recognize the value that students have to their local communities. Students are willing to learn, willing to work, and a mutual relationship between a university and its community is priceless. The eye-opening experiences of Service Learning help cultivate independent thinkers and introduce a sense of belonging through community engagement, reflection, and an understanding of local and global relationships; ultimately creating better, globally-engaged citizens.

