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Humboldt in the Time of COVID Written Component/Reflection

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Internship Written Component
Humboldt in the Time of COVID-109
Malia Haley
Fall 2020

1. Name of agency/organization and name of supervisor.

The internship was with Humboldt State University, and the name of my supervisor is Jennifer Tarlton, who is with the department of Environmental Science and Management.

2. Description of what you accomplished during the internship (what did you do, and what did you learn?)

The goal of my internship was initially oriented toward conducting interviews with 3 key groups in order to ultimately compare and contrast the information. The key groups included professors/faculty, peers/students, and organizations. Due to the unpredictable circumstances that COVID-19 and extreme weather events that have occurred over the span of this baffling year, many people's schedules were both unreliable and unpredictable, including my own. I had to compromise with the tumultuous, ever-changing conditions and refine my target groups. I ultimately settled with two groups - interviewing peers/students and faculty/staff. I believed that interviewing individuals from both of those groups and then comparing and contrasting the results from the interviews would result in valuable data.

This time is absolutely historical. A serious shift in day-to-day life has occurred, and everything has changed for everyone in baffling ways. I chose to analyze students and professors because I'm a graduating college student, and those focus groups feel very relevant to me. Not

only did I settle on my chosen groups due to relevance, but also because I believe that procuring information from those groups is both critical and important. This is the first fully online semester of college due to a global pandemic, with little notice to both students and professors. Adaptation was a requirement to survive this semester, regardless of personal circumstances that could interrupt academic performance during this time.

This time in history has made the college experience feel very informal and formal at the same time. Everyone involved has had to shed formalities in order to endure the reality we're living in. We've had to be real, honest, and transparent throughout the process of learning online while dealing with other difficulties in our lives. We've had to adopt a more empathetic, honest, and patient way of interacting with one another, whether you're a professor or student.

Recording this time is so important for future generations at HSU. It'll reveal to them how incredibly difficult and interesting this time was. I believe in the intent of this project full heartedly, and I'm so happy to be apart of it. I wish I could've produced more during this internship, but I'm satisfied with what I could do. What did I do and what did I learn? I learned so much about how this time, pertaining to COVID-19, is impacting students. I learned about how students feel ripped off, confused, exhausted, unprepared, concerned, and misunderstood. I learned that although the transition to being fully online as a science major is enough of a reason to feel overwhelmed, students' personal lives have been filled with worry and struggle as well.

They deal with sick and at-risk family members, loss of jobs, moving, tumultuous politics, and the anxiety that comes with living through a time like this. Although the collective struggles have been overwhelming for each student, one theme consistently surfaced: this is hard, but we are all thankful to be alive.

I interviewed a total of 4 students. Two of the students are back home in southern California due to the pandemic. They were here for the beginning of it, then moved during this semester when it became clear that classes would be held on a completely virtual platform, and that no in-person responsibilities were to occur. It was interesting to have two students out of the county, and two students in. I was able to gain some insight on what it's like dealing with COVID-19 in different cities with different protocols, and compare it to the conditions here in Humboldt County. The out-of-town students are located in Sacramento and Berkley.

Greta is one of the students I interviewed. She's an Environmental Science Major, and she's living in Sacramento. She expressed that being in a such a large city during a pandemic comes with additional layers of fear and suffocation. Humboldt County has a smaller population number and is more spread out, as we live in a dense forest. It is easier to stay away from people and practice safety measures. It is very difficult to do that in a large city, especially considering some people choose to be safer and more considerate than others. Additionally, Humboldt County has many outdoorsy recreational opportunities. Living in quarantine is a suffocating experience; at least those living through COVID-19 in Humboldt County can find a safe, isolated pocket of nature somewhere to enjoy fresh air and stimulation. Greta also expressed difficulties regarding her field. The online platform for environmental education and interpretation simply isn't as fulfilling or authentic as it would normally be. If anything, it's an oxymoron.

Tara is the student in Berkley, and she's an old friend of mine – we both lived in Los Angeles and moved to Humboldt County for college together. She's currently pursuing her PhD in Cellular Molecular Biology at UC Davis. She expressed similar views. Living in a highly-populated city comes with more risk, concern, and potential exposure. There's a suffocating

feeling associated with quarantining in large, bustling city. Especially when many individuals refuse to stay at home, regardless of CDC guidelines. Tara has been met hurdles in her field of work. She's also a tutor and teacher's assistant, so she's been in the demanding and unique position of both teaching and being a student.

Emily and Brianna are two other students I interviewed, both sedentary in Humboldt County. Emily is an Environmental Science Major, and Brianna majored in Biological Anthropology and currently works in her field. The COVID-19 experiences shared with me by these two were considerably different from the accounts of Greta and Tara.

Emily expressed deep gratitude for the quality and swiftness of local responses to COVID-19. Social distancing practices have generally been practiced efficiently, community members have been conscious of one another, and it's been easy to isolate given our smaller population and expansive region. She also said that the local community has displayed strong elements of community resilience, as we all have done a good job of supporting our local businesses during this time. Emily also went on to provide a ton of insight on her experiences taking online classes. She's been struggling. She isn't the type of student who adapts easily to an online learning environment. Like myself, she asks many questions as a student and the in-person, face-to-face learning experience is the best for her methods of learning. She's had to reconstruct the way she approaches day-to-day life, implementing her own carefully assembled structure. That doesn't come easy to everyone, especially at the drop of a hat, which is what this whole year has felt like. It's impacted her mental and emotional health, but she's persevering and succeeding.

Brianna said similar things about local responses being applaudable. She's currently working in her field, and expressed some work difficulties due to the pandemic. Her biggest

struggle has been the separation and preservation of mental health, which I've also struggled with. We were able to relate on that note, and it was cathartic.

All in all – I learned that Humboldt County isn't such a bad place to be during a pandemic. The isolation, limitless outdoorsy recreational opportunities, and strong local resilience are all aspects to appreciate during this time. The most shared/common struggle among each student was the lack of stimulation due to quarantining, the difficulties associated with transitioning to an online platform without the ability to prepare or adapt, and mental health. I related with the students on each struggle. This interview process revealed to me how much this experience has impacted mental health among us all.

I also learned about the difficulties that professors and faculty are facing, and how they're trying their very best to cope and assist students in coping. They've had to readjust their curriculum on such short notice, while ensuring students get the best experience possible, while also tending to their personal lives. As a student, it was easy to get lost in my own personal distaste toward the learning conditions, my own struggle, and my own fears. Throughout the duration of this project, I've had the opportunity to peer into the world of a professor during a time like this, and it is not any easier than being a student. The compassion, care and flexibility that professors have displayed and offered during this time has been both touching and powerful.

Unfortunately, I was not able to secure as many interviews with professors or faculty. But, understandably, schedules are tight and unpredictable and I was lucky to secure the number of interviews I did from each target group. I had the pleasure of interviewing Jennifer Tarlton, a professor at Humboldt State University in the field of Environmental Education and Interpretation.

I also had the pleasure of interviewing Yvonne Everett, whom is a professor at Humboldt State University in the field of Environmental Planning, as well as my academic advisor.

Professor Tarlton provided invaluable insight. She expressed how the pandemic is impacting the field of Environmental Education and Interpretation, and how Education is especially impacted. Programs have lost funding, jobs have been lost, environmental education services and camps are closed and many won't recover, and that particular aspect of the field has fallen apart quite a bit. The opportunity to visit sites and learn in-person is a critical component to staying true to the process of environmental education. With a pandemic such as COVID-19, students cannot come together in groups and go on trips. Interpretation isn't as impacted. Jen goes on to explain that there have been some beneficial aspects of the pandemic for the field of environmental interpretation. It has been a slow moving, un-changing field for many years. The pandemic has brought interpreters to the table and put them in a position where they need to come up with innovative ideas for the new way of learning. This means updating some methodologies of environmental interpretation. Interpreters have had to look closely at the field and make changes that otherwise would not have been made, says Jen.

She also spoke about the impact this has had on students. She could not fathom how students are making it through a time like this, and expressed deep compassion and empathy.

Professor Everett's interview was also very enlightening. She expressed that although the struggles in her field may not match the gravity of struggle in other fields, the isolation of COVID-19 has made a devastating impact on the field. She expressed much of her work is teaching and researching, and she's an environmental planner. As an environmental planner myself, I took many classes with her and all of them involved fieldtrips. Speaking from personal experience as I was

able to take her classes in a normal learning environment, I can't imagine taking them without the field trip component. It was the meat of the class; it provided important hands-on learning and provided the opportunity to engage with the local community. Engaging with the local community is an important aspect of being an Environmental Planner.

Professor Everett also expressed compassion and empathy toward the students during this time. I feel lucky to be a student at HSU during this time. Professors, faculty and staff have been exceptional pertaining to making life as a student easier and feasible.

3. Reflection on the value of specific HSU courses in the context of the internship, and what additional skills or knowledge you wish you had had. Appended copies of maps, reports etc. that you worked on during the internship.

Some skills I learned in HSU classes did prove to be relevant and useful for this project. In my Environmental Senior Planning Practicum class, students were required to conduct interviews with members and business owners of the local community based on their specific project needs. We needed to complete a specific program which would illustrate that we all understood how to interview ethically and obtain consent forms. Considering my project is both interview and research based, I was able to utilize those skills. Additionally, as a graduating Environmental Planner, I've become a very skilled researcher. I haven't met many people who would agree with the following sentiment, but I absolutely love writing research papers. The process of the project involved me delving into the topic of COVID-19 and its impact on students so that I could go into the interview process with a sharper lens.

I wish I would've been able to conduct more interviews. I think it would've been great to have at least 5 interviewees from each category. I also wish I could've met my initial goal, which was to interview from a more diversified pool of groups. But, as I've stated already, times are unpredictable. Adaptation has become a skill we've all had to master and accept on some level.

I believe HSU offered me a fantastic and pristine learning experience. I am graduating with a set of skills that I truly do not believe I would've found in another college institution as an undergraduate. Humboldt County is one of the most unique places in the world. Regarding Environmental Science and Natural Resources, it is nothing short of ideal to go to college here. Although this internship wasn't specifically geared toward my field of work, I was able to learn valuable and important information. Additionally, I think I've gathered skills throughout my educational career as an undergraduate that have put me in a position to approach this project with an educated lens. I think it's pretty amazing that HSU created a project like this for students to take part in. Having an oral history of Humboldt County in the Time of Covid-19 is paramount for future generations. I am thankful to have been apart of this wonderful project.