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CEP '19
Reflective Essay

Pre-CEP

After four years at the University of Washington, I can confidently say that this school was the right choice and was exactly where I needed to be. I came to this university thinking that I would be an engineer fulfilling every expectation that anyone I knew as well as myself had ever placed on me. I am (now) very happy to say that I failed spectacularly in this plan and never even applied to the college of engineering. I was not successful in my endeavours in math and science classes here and after a year of crashing and burning in these courses, I was on the hunt for something new.

At first I thought this something new would be design. I was signed up for the class when a friend of mine showed me the website for CEP citing it as what looked like it would be a “perfect fit” for me. I dropped the design class and enrolled in CEP 200. After the first few weeks of this class, I knew this was it, this was the place for me. Applying for the program I was nervous that my transcript and my shortcomings as an engineering student would keep me from the program. I was candid about my experience looking for a program to fit my interests. I didn’t know what I wanted to do in CEP, but I knew I wanted to learn about communities and the way they interact with the built environment. Although I later heard I did not dress formally enough for my interview (I was given misinformation), all went well with my application and I became a part of the program! I received the acceptance email while driving to an event. I saw the subject line while at a stop light and immediately pulled over to call my mom and tell her I got into the program. As much as she congratulated me, she equally scolded me for looking at my phone in the car. From this moment forward, I was finally excited about my education again.

An important element of my college career before CEP was my work toward a minor in Spanish. Paired with all of my engineering classes, these classes were consistently the classes I had the best grades in. I realized I was not excited to learn about engineering. As I learned the Spanish language and culture, this minor pushed me to continue to improve myself and in many ways inadvertently pushed me toward CEP.

As much as I wished my transcript looked a little nicer and I had a few less meltdowns under my belt, I wouldn’t be who I am today and would have never found my way to CEP. As embarrassed as I am by my performance and grades early in my college career, I am more than proud enough to make up for that embarrassment as to how I pulled my time at UW together into something I am genuinely proud of. Though I am unsure if I ever achieved the status of being “Boundless” as the university encourages, I certainly learned what it means to “Fail Forward.”

Junior Year

So my dreams came true, I was finally in the program. The start of my junior year was filled with much excitement at all that was to come as well as many new experiences in my college career. Although I had been to the meet and greet in the spring, CEP orientation is the

first time I remember meeting and getting a feel for most of my classmates. I remember thinking "I have entered a major of all hippies," but in the best way possible. It took a lot of time to get warmed up to all of my classmates, especially being split in 301, but I had the overall sense that I was in a major of good people who were really committed to changing the world for the better. Fall retreat this year was the first time I really began to understand what CEP was and could begin to map out how I wanted to best utilize my time in this program. This was also the first time I was able to get to know the seniors and see the ways that this program attracts cool people who are passionate year after year.

My first quarter as a CEPster was a big quarter for me, the only quarter where I took a full 18 credit workload. I enjoyed my classes outside of CEP and a class working toward my Spanish minor, but my focus as a member of this program was in the course work of 301. In all honesty, this was the most reading that I have ever done for any class at this university. I had never taken a philosophy class before, and it felt especially pertinent to me that this class was focused on the idea of communities. I felt that I was simultaneously able to gather an understanding of philosophies from a broad range of western philosophers and deepen my understanding of what a community is. This was also my first CEP core class to have facilitations. Before coming to college, I would say that I was adequate at presentations. As difficult as these facilitations were to plan and awkward as it was to present them, they began my development toward considering myself to be an excellent presenter.

The core class in my winter quarter of this year was certainly the most difficult. I, like many of my classmates, strongly disliked the content of the 302 class and quickly became less and less involved. I think this class had value and I felt that I learned a lot about policy and data from the NEPA project, but otherwise felt that I could have learned the content pertaining to the environment better from classes within the program of the environment. Negative as this experience was at the time, it was certainly a bonding experience for our cohort. A common theme I have seen through my time in university is that students are excellent complainers, and we thrive off of complaining about our problems together. It's a known psychological principle that shared negative experience brings about a sense of bonding and ownership. Like hazing for a fraternity, we came out of this experience wearing it as a badge of honor. A new responsibility I took on this quarter was stepping into the role as the point for the communication committee. Although I led tentatively this quarter trying to get a feel for how to approach my position, I felt that I learned about what it looked like to be a leader in this program and effectively collaborate with my peers.

The final quarter of my junior year was the most planning heavy quarter in my academics. Two of my three classes, CEP 303 and URBDP 300, were centered around planning. In URBDP 300 I gained an understanding of the history of planning in America. In CEP 303 we were grounded in the actual space of the Chinatown International District. This community is my community and it was very interesting to do social observations in the area. I have always cared about the CID, but the neighborhood project in CEP 303 was the first time I began to feel a sense of ownership. This work also solidified for me that doing work in communities you are invested in makes the work so much more meaningful. In addition to my planning classes, this quarter was very design focused for me. One of the best classes I have taken at this university, Digital Design, furthered my design skills, especially outside of the

Adobe suite. Also during this quarter, I continued as the communication committee point where I successfully executed work to print just under 100 sweatshirts for the major. This is still some of my best design work and is a piece I am especially proud to wear and see my peers wear.

Senior Year

I started my senior year of college outside of the country. In the winter of my junior I decided I wanted to have a new experience in the fall. Since the program will waive one quarter of classes, I began looking for study abroad and internship options that would get me out of Seattle and onto new experiences. Since my mom is a professor at Gonzaga, the program very graciously held a spot in the program for me. At first it was just a backup, but as time went on and other options looked bleak and much less exciting, I committed to the program!

This program was easily one of the best parts of my college experience. Although the quarter was not particularly challenging academically, I learned a great deal about other cultures as well as about myself. Gonzaga doesn't have any programs that resemble CEP, so I took classes in communication, visual arts, and psychology that I thought could still work to compliment my CEP education. These classes each found heavy focus in comparing Italian and American culture, and although not directly applicable to the environment I encounter on a regular basis, taught me a lot about what multicultural environments and conversations can look like. Certainly one of the best parts of the experience was travelling while abroad. I traveled to 7 different countries and experienced cultures and views on life I had never encountered before. Of course it was fun, but I feel that so much of the value came from removing myself from my own culture and set ways to experience something new. I grew up around the Gonzaga community for my entire childhood and being a part of it was better than I ever could have expected. I formed so many close friendships that I couldn't believe we had known each other for only four months!

Being away from CEP was difficult and I missed my peers dearly. Coming back felt natural and although I had missed some of the major experiences from the fall, felt that I was able to pick up where I left off with the cohort. While abroad, I applied for my internship at the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority (SCIDpda). I wanted this internship so badly and thought it was perfect to pair with my studies in CEP so I prepared for the interview for a solid 6 hours. I felt that it would be a good fit, but when I was selected and started I realized that it was an amazing fit! It is everything I could have asked for in an internship. It paired well with everything I had studied through CEP and allowed me to do meaningful work for a community I care deeply about. I also had the privilege to work alongside some empowering, encouraging members of the APIA community who work so hard for the CID and worked hard throughout my internship to make me feel valid and accepted in my APIA and mixed identity.

Coming back from abroad, it was a bit of a shift for the workload. In Italy I was doing a maximum of 4 hours of homework a week because the coursework didn't require anything above this. Coming back was jumping into heavy readings from CEP 461 as well as working on my senior project. In both of these workloads I became more frustrated as the quarter went on. With CEP 461, I became increasingly upset when we read reading after reading of Western ethics from white male authors. Although we read two white female authors at the end of the

quarter, I felt that I could not completely understand my own ethics and especially ethics as a whole from reading this narrow scope of ethics. Especially because there are elements of my personal ethics that I know come from my non-white background that I did not see reflected in the authors we were reading. With my senior project, I was (and still am) very passionate about the subject matter but hit a wall toward the end of the quarter with my research as well as concept. I was able to push through, but had to move forward with intention to ensure that the work I was doing was valid.

My spring quarter was almost entirely focused on my senior project. To talk more about my senior project as a part of my education, this project is something I never would have dreamed of being able to complete before joining CEP. Especially since coming to college, I feel that I have been experiencing an identity crisis related to being multiracial and multicultural. This project allowed me to explore more about what my identity means in a way that creates representation for myself and other multiracial and multicultural individuals. If there were an urban design career related to including multiracial and multicultural individuals, that would be my dream job, and this project allowed me to experience what that would look like. I wanted to make a product that was worthwhile and meaningful. I worried that others would not see the value of the project in the same way I do and was especially nervous leading up to Senior Project Night. I received so much feedback that this work was valid and important for representation that I had found a renewed fire to continue my work on this project and do this kind of work for the rest of my life!

Identity

My identity has been in constant flux throughout my time in university but has been a huge source of personal growth. Before coming to college, my identity was heavily based in my academic performance and I was an excellent student in high school. When I began to take STEM classes at UW, this was the first time I could no longer claim this as a part of my identity because I was no longer making the grades I was once able to. At first I lamented this loss and wished that I could have just worked harder while I was in those classes. But moving on from that identity led me to coming into my identity as a student and human being now: a creative. I never thought that I had the skills or brain for ever being able to call myself a creative. But when I applied myself and looked out for all the ways I was thinking creatively and creative problem solving, I realized it had been there the whole time. I now proudly refer to myself as a creative.

Another huge part of my identity has been discovering what it means to be multiracial and multicultural. Growing up in Spokane, a city that is 90% white, I was always perceived to be Asian and fully so. There were very few others like me in Spokane so since I was a person of color, I was classified as the other. When I moved to Seattle, a city brimming with diversity, I began to be perceived as white. Because of my appearance as well as identity as a third generation Asian American, people wouldn't know how to interpret my ethnically ambiguous appearance and would just assume I was white. I didn't think too much of it at first, because for the first time in my life, I was no longer a part of the other. But this sentiment wore off and people invalidating my multiracial and multicultural identity became frustrating. Identity as a multigenerational Asian American is difficult enough to navigate, but the added element of being only half Asian and living in the post-WWII climate, makes my identity incredible difficult for me

to understand find belonging in. In the class I took to fulfill my diversity credit, we learned about the history of Japanese Americans, and for the first time, I realized that even though I am ethnically half Japanese, I feel culturally Japanese American. This realization was freeing in that I knew that I didn't have to try to continue to connect to culture I had never experienced. As much as I lament this loss of connection to culture, I understand that this disconnect is characteristic of being Japanese American and as big a part of my history and culture as the my Japanese cultural background. My senior project was a chance for me to take all that I have learned about myself in my time at UW and make it into something that can be used to create belong for those with identities like me.

Post-grad

At the end of my college career, I am inclined to think about why I followed this educational path in the first place. My mother is in academia so it is a path I always grew up knowing I would pursue, but I wanted to learn about myself and how to be a person who can actually do work in the world. These are certainly processes that extend far past my college experience, but I know this could be a start. As my college education went on, the more my education became for me and the more meaning it held for my personal identity. I wanted to know that I could do it and accomplish something I could be truly proud of.

I knew I would find friends along the way and meet so many new people. What I didn't think, is that I would find a community as tight knit and meaningful as CEP. I'm scared to leave the education system and the way of life I have known for the past 16 years, but I have become increasingly sad to be leaving my friends and peers. Especially in this program, I have learned so much from everyone in CEP and grown because of them, I just hope that I am able to find a community like this once I leave the program.

Finally, my answer to the dreaded question "What do you want to do after graduation?" My answer is I'm not set on any path or another. My goal, hope, aspiration is to do whatever I end up doing to complete meaningful work to serve communities.