

250 Hours at Academy of Whole Learning: Internship Reflection

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Introduction

During the summer months of 2015, I received a Marketing and Development Intern position at Academy of Whole Learning (AOWL). AOWL is a non-profit, private school in St. Louis Park, Minnesota that serves students with autism spectrum disorder or related learning differences. I never expected to intern at a school, a private school nonetheless. It was small and packed. There wasn't a lot of office space, and everyone seemed to have a million things on their plate. To be quite honest, it wasn't that appealing to me. However a couple of weeks after my interview, I went in for orientation. There were four of us interns, all hired for diverse tasks. Sheridan was assisting the Head of School and putting a lot of effort into accreditation materials. Nicola was assisting the Business Manager and organizing files. Zack and I had similar roles and worked with Lindsey Brandt, Director of Advancement. We were responsible for amassing donations and sponsorships for AOWL's *Minds of All Kinds Comedy Show and Silent Auction at Acme Comedy Co.*, to take place in October of 2015.

As we plunged into our summer workloads, spending hours together in a small office space I quickly realized that the summer was going to be vastly different than I had expected. I would begin to see why all of these people put in well over 40 hour work weeks and stressed themselves to the limits by having three times the amount of responsibilities an average professional had. My time at AOWL gave me opportunities to experience various types of communication in a professional work setting, incorporate my education into a profession, and gave me insight for my future career.

Responsibilities

AOWL is a modest school serving 37 students. The faculty and staff have many roles that differ in responsibility. I worked closely with Lindsey Brandt, Director of Advancement, over

the summer. Her work involved admissions, leadership, teacher workshop, fundraising, and various other tasks. Our intern roles followed suit and varied as well. The role I was responsible for which was most stressed during my internship was reaching out to local and national organizations to request donations for a silent auction fundraiser.

While I worked on acquiring donations for the *Minds of All Kinds Comedy Show and Silent Auction at Acme Comedy Co.* I did many tasks. I worked online researching businesses and organizations that would donate to our fundraiser. I read forums, blog posts, and even Pinterest boards that gave tips on which businesses to contact, what they had received from the business, and how long it took each one to respond to their request. How a business or organization communicated itself to others online was essential to my work. I figured out the most effective way to communicate with each organization—electronic donation forms, emails, phone calls, or letters. From there I modified pre-written ask letters to each company. I kept track of all the companies that I reached out to in a Google Spreadsheet that I shared with Lindsey, and by the end of the summer, I had reached out to more than 500 organizations.

Lindsey and I did a lot of brainstorming over the summer, whether it was through e-mail or in the office. We bounced ideas off of one another, discussing how to motivate companies to give to us and how to package and organize smaller donations that we had received. One idea would lead to another, and I had to look around for a pen and notebook every time we finished a conversation. We would cover so much while we brainstormed, I knew I would forget something if I didn't write it down at once.

Zack, a marketing intern, and I also communicated more closely, as we were working on the same project. He was heading up finding sponsorships for our event, as I was for donations. We discussed companies that we did or considered reaching out to. There were times when I

would find a company that gave in the form of monetary donations, and I would e-mail Zack. He did the same for me with companies that were more likely to donate an item for the silent auction. The two of us also required some of the same paperwork, so we would send files back and forth to one another and discuss information—like the schools 501(c)(3) Tax ID, ST3, demographic, and financial information. I pretty much had all of AOWL's tax information memorized, so when we was looking for information, he would just ask me from across the table we worked at together.

For all of the faculty and staff there was interpersonal communication scattered throughout the day. The interns would sit together near the Dean of Students and one of the teacher that was working on curriculum for AOWL's new primary program. We would talk inevitably converse at some point during the day for a bit of reprieve from our work. Oftentimes this reprieve would turn into brainstorming and problem-solving for a projects that one of us were working on. Since all of us had different experiences to draw from, we all had substantial input and ideas for one another. For instance when I was trying to come up with businesses and organizations in the area to send donation ask letters, staff who were more familiar with the St. Louis Park area would begin to ramble off local businesses so quickly, that I couldn't write them down fast enough. Finding businesses online isn't that difficult, but when people would tell me that certain businesses had donated to other fundraisers previously, it made it much simpler to narrow down who I would put priority in contacting.

I took notes on all of the work that I did. The fundraiser I was working on was a first time event for the school, and AOWL hopes to continue doing similar fundraisers in the future. At the end of the summer, I compiled a list of notes for Lindsey and whoever does my job next summer. I realized how businesses and organizations preferred to receive donation requests, and what

information was most important to them. The sum of my work will make creating a silent auction fundraiser much simpler in the future.

Connection to Coursework

I first learned the words *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* at some point in middle school or high school. Little did I know that an abundance of my education would revolve around those three little words. English, communication, marketing, and other courses often taught what those words mean and how they are used. During my time at AOWL, I often put the words into action as we communicated with businesses and organizations in order to get them to support the school. *Pathos* was inevitably one of the most powerful tactics we used, as AOWL gives one-of-a-kind education to students with autism spectrum disorder or related learning differences. I found that most organizations found pleasure in donating to non-profits that made them feel good about themselves, helping the “less fortunate.” The students AOWL serves do face different learning challenges than most human beings do, so we would highlight why our school was so important for the students.

Another way that my education infiltrated my internship this summer was through Cultivation Theory. I became acquainted with this theory during my CMST 190 course, Introduction to Communication Studies. A classmate and I partnered up on a project and had to familiarize ourselves with this theory to a point where we could teach the class about it. Cultivation Theory is a fairly new theory that was most famously studied by George Gerbner, James Shanahan, and Larry Gross. It started with the Cultural Indicators project, which was developed on the idea that the violence portrayed on television affected Americans’ view on violence in reality (Shanahan, 2009). My classmate and I took this theory further and discussed

what this implies for other themes that we watch on television as well—gender stereotypes, fashion and style trends, and national demographic statistics for example.

This ties in with my internship at AOWL because in my free time this past summer I started watching *Parenthood*, a show that follows four adult siblings and their parenting lifestyles. The eldest sibling, Adam Braverman, finds out that his son, Max, has Asperger syndrome in the pilot episode. Asperger syndrome is on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum (Autism Speaks, 2015). It was interesting to watch Adam Braverman and his wife deal with their sons newly identified disorder on television while working at a school where all of the parents are also working their lifestyles around their child's needs. While watching *Parenthood* gave me a small amount of insight into these peoples' lives, I quickly discovered that the television show and the parents' reality were different. It reminded me of Cultivation Theory, and how television modifies our scope of reality.

Communication is a wide-ranging study, and the connections to professional experience are countless. Interpersonal communication, noise, listening, non-verbals, and so many other aspects of communication are relevant and need to be utilized in the professional world. The number of theories that could be examined are endless, and using them to understand a professional position has been a strong asset.

Career

My summer at AOWL was an incredibly positive experience. I found an internship where I least expected, and it truly shifted my paradigm on non-profits, children with special needs, event planning, and gave me insight what I would like out of a career. One thing that I was grateful for was the schedule flexibility. I had to commute from St. Paul to St. Louis Park on a daily basis. Traffic was horrific. I found myself working around rush hour to avoid heavy traffic

flow, while co-workers who lived nearer to work knew the back roads and could avoid the highways and freeways altogether. I was also able to work from home at times when I didn't require materials from the office. This was an unexpected and pleasant feature of this internship. On evenings when I didn't have plans, I could pull out my laptop and get a few more hours in for the day. Some days I drove across the Twin Cities to pick up donations for the silent auction, so I would start working at home for a couple hours until I could pick up the donation. Then I would leave for AOWL from there. Looking towards a career, I would either need to live nearer to my work or have flexibility in my schedule. In a culture that has such strict views on time, I worry that the latter is as plausible as the first, but I think I would enjoy it.

This internship also expanded my ideas of what kind of career I'm interested in having. I thought I would go into Marketing or Public Relations when I graduated, and that is still an avenue that I am considering. However, when I interviewed for a Marketing & Development internship at AOWL, the Head of School and Director of Advancement pointed out how my event planning experience fit the internship description. I have volunteered as an Event Coordinator and Community Team Leader in that past, planning events for organizations or my dormitory floor in college among other event planning experience. I have continually volunteered time to event plan out of enjoyment. I found that I was good at remembering meticulous details that go into event planning, and had a knack for it as well. I had never thought much about going into event planning for a career, because everyone always told me that I would be working nights and weekends. However I think that people forget that most of the planning happens during regular business hours. The actual events happen on a night or weekend every so often—depending on the type of event that it is. My communication studies and marketing background would be supporting and accommodating in this career move as well. Event

planning, at this point, seems like a natural step in my career, and I think I would find enjoyment in it even if it's not the career I forever desire to follow.

I also had the opportunity to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder test at the end of my internship. I was planning on taking this test at some point, but never got around to actually doing it. During teacher workshop week, however, the Head of School sent me the link as a "thank you" for all the work I had done. I was also able to participate in the workshop where we talked about the diversity in our strengths and how they affect the way we work. When I took the test, I discovered some of my top strengths and am now able to understand some of the ways I work. I'll be highlighting three of these strengths that gave me some clarity in what career skills suit me best.

Brainstorming is among one of these strengths. I tend to have an innovative way of doing things, rather than following a typical system. I enjoy discussing theories and am stimulated by conversing with others of original thinking. Generating ideas is one thing that I relish, and utilizing this in my career would be ideal (Rath, 2007).

Adapting and reacting to situations that occur is also a strong strength of mine. Things happen unexpectedly in school, life, and work. Being part of the mundane is something that I have a difficult time doing, and prefer to allocate my attention to important demands as they arise. Following someone else's plan of action can be difficult for me, so a career that I can be innovative in is highly desirable for me.

Finally, I am an arranger. I can organize well but also have flexibility in this. I have the ability to figure out all of the different pieces or variables and reorganize them into the most productive fashion. I have the ability to play an integral role when change is in the works. What this strengths has shown me is that I would thrive in teams, change, and an unstructured setting.

Careers have countless variables to consider, and understanding these variables should have a great impact on career choice. I've never thought that I would stay in the same career for my entire life, and have thought that I could find enjoyment in many different avenues. My Marketing and Development Internship at AOWL gave me real work-life experience that I could only begin to understand once I worked in a professional setting.

Conclusion

My time as a Marketing and Development Intern at Academy of Whole Learning gave me a unique experience that I had never had before. It was my first time working in a professional setting somewhat related to my career goals. I was able to do some networking with staff and parents of the students, do work that was highly rewarding, and apply my educational background to a profession. The experience was highly transformative for me as I change from student to professional. The experience allowed me to utilize my educational background in communication studies and marketing. The experience gave me insight for my career as well, allowing me to contemplate the variables and how my personality would fit in different professional settings. I grew to love the school and got close to the staff there. In my last few days, the Head of School said that we came in as interns and were leaving as staff. The Director of Advancement also told me to keep an eye out for future job openings at AOWL, as the school is in a developmental stage and creating new staff positions is a great possibility in the near future. I would strongly consider returning to AOWL as a professional and highly recommend an internship there to other students in various programs.

References

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