

Life Lessons from the Field: Reflections from a Student Leader

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Since the beginning of my college career, I've been told that it is important to take advantage of opportunities that allow me to experience my chosen profession in action. A few of these opportunities have been Garbology Day, a waste audit to raise awareness of recycling and sustainable practices at the College of Western Idaho; working with University of Idaho's excavation of the 1860 Fort Boise Surgeon's Quarters at the Boise Veterans' hospital; and serving as a session monitor for the Great Basin Archaeological Conference.

While it has been great to learn from these opportunities, a nagging question remained: how could I gain real life experience that would allow me to stand out from others with the same degree?

Leadership roles are few in the community college setting, but they are necessary for students to learn and grow in a chosen profession. There are significant advantages to being given these opportunities. Through the efforts of Professor Nikki Gorrell, who is also the advisor for the Anthropology Club, our club started the Celebration Park Petroglyph Recording Project.

Situated along the Snake River, Celebration Park was established in 1989 as Idaho's only archaeological park by Tom Bicak, Director of Canyon County Parks, Recreation, and Waterways. The area is

cluttered with large basalt melon gravel deposited by the Bonneville flood. Archaic Native Americans, ancestors of the Paiute and Shoshone, used it as a good wintering ground. As a result, the park is home to scores of petroglyphs dated from 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.



Several attempts had been made to record the park's petroglyphs, but these recordings did not meet the standards of the American Rock Art Research Association. Our Anthropology Club was charged with surveying and recording the petroglyph corridor of the park. This task, of course, would take several field seasons to accomplish. I was a volunteer on the first field season in Spring 2014. It became quite clear that this project would need additional funding to complete the job adequately.

Tom Bicak of Canyon County informed us that Canyon County had funds set aside for historic preservation, and this project

would fall under this description. In essence, all we had to do is apply for a grant. I had reviewed grants for the Idaho State Board of Education and expressed an interest in learning the other side of the process. As incoming Anthropology Club president, I worked with the outgoing president, Jessica Mylan, and Professor Gorrell to begin the collaborative process of developing a grant proposal.

The petroglyph project was in its infancy. As someone who was just a volunteer on the project, in a new field of study, I felt like a new parent and very inadequate. But by working with Professor Gorrell to better understand the scope and intricacies of the Petroglyph Recording Project, I gained confidence. Furthermore, with the guidance of Tom Bicak, we were able to determine what tools and supplies would be necessary to take the project to the next level.

Working on public lands required that we work with several government agencies throughout the process, beginning with the Canyon County Parks, Recreation, and Waterways department. Listening to and learning the vision of director Tom Bicak helped us build the skills necessary to develop a project that would fulfil his organization's goals. Next, we worked with the Canyon County Historical Preservation Commission, who initially approved our grant. This experience allowed me to learn firsthand about the paperwork and deadlines required for a grant. The Commission, in turn, forwarded our proposal to the Canyon County Commissioners, who ultimately approved funding for necessary technology and supplies.

From local government, we moved to the college arena. The College of Western Idaho and the College of Western Idaho Foundation are only five years old and are separate but linked entities. They had not experienced a student club receiving an external grant before. Although the funding brought new challenges for all parties, it was another important learning experience. While this process was challenging and frustrating at times, it was rewarding. I knew that if I could navigate this situation, I would only be better prepared for the next time.

During the two months of learning the intricacies of bureaucracy, details about participants, training, and other logistical issues also needed to be arranged. Potential participants submitted an application that included a CV, letter of intent and interest in the project, and letter of recommendation. As a volunteer project, we worried about how many people would want to participate. The response was incredible; we had 25 anthropology students and alumni participate in the five days of field work, which posed some logistical challenges. The assignment was to survey a large section of land and record petroglyphs.

Another key point to clarify is that until going into the field, I was not an official leader of the project. As Anthropology Club President, I was helping with background work, because this is where I felt most comfortable. Once I was given the role of project coordinator, I was leaving my comfort zone and felt a weight of responsibility. My advisor assured me that I was capable of the task.

Having been on the project since its inception meant I had important experience

and understanding of the mechanics of the project. I now needed to take that experience and develop a plan. My advisor and I developed field procedures that included field kits. Training in field procedures and paperwork took place on the first day to cause less confusion. To survey the land, we divided into several teams. Each team member would be responsible for a particular aspect of the job, and each member's job had tools and supplies included in the kits. Teams surveyed a given area and recorded any found petroglyphs. Another support team shuttled between areas and provided essential supplies, food, and water. Experience showed that checks needed to be in place at each step of the recording process to ensure quality and accuracy. These audits allowed for questions to be answered and continued training during the process. As the project coordinator, at the end of the day, I would input the data from the paperwork. This step also helped ensure that any other questions that arose could be addressed and that what happened in the field stayed in the field and would not drag out after the field session.

Conclusions

A significant part of the project's success was having a committed group of volunteer anthropology students. A supportive faculty advisor also helped and encouraged me as I translated what I had learned in Anthropology coursework into field work, applying for a grant, navigating different government agencies, and managing and organizing individuals in a field context. As I have graduated and am attending a four-year university, I have come to value the

opportunities that I received at the community college level. Being a project coordinator for a field project is usually an opportunity reserved for graduate students. Receiving one-on-one attention at the community college level and being offered new experiences allowed me to learn how I want to proceed with the rest of my academic career. It is vital to learn this lesson early to be able to answer that nagging question, how can I gain real life experience that will allow me to stand out from others with the same degree? This opportunity occurred for me at a community college and should be a goal for all community colleges.