

Education Internship at Stratford Ecological Center

Alayna Press, The Ohio State University



BACKGROUND

I worked this summer as an Education Intern at Stratford Ecological Center. Stratford is located 30 minutes north of Columbus, in Delaware, Ohio. Stratford is an educational farm, and a nature preserve. The main mission of the organization is to educate and “foster appreciation for the land”. Sustainable organic farming practices are used to produce crops and raise livestock.

How I Found this Job:

Stratford hosts a farm camp for kids in the summer. I went to the camp when I was a kid, and after going to the camps I started volunteering on the farm as an adult. I got to know the Education Director, April Hoy, through these experiences. Last summer I went to volunteer and I asked April if I could apply to work the following summer in one of the seasonal internship positions. She told me to email her in the fall, and after some email correspondence, I was offered the job.

ON THE JOB

This organization has a big emphasis on sustainability. As a result, I got to see sustainable farming techniques in practice. The duties for this internship changed day to day, which was a great learning experience.

The internship team on a hike



The needs of a farm are varied and often require a lot of creativity, as well as on the spot decision making. I was on a work team of five people. Some of our tasks included cleaning pens, making and distributing feed, trimming hooves, and moving herds. We also worked on crops and garden plants. We watered, weeded, cultivated, mulched, harvested, planted, seeded, pruned, and did whatever else each plant required in order to produce food. We did other miscellaneous tasks including working with machinery, fixing fences, building shade structures, removing invasive species from the forest, extracting honey from beehives, installing solar panels, and fixing anything that broke.

We held a biweekly farmer's market for the Delaware community



In the Community:

On the community side of the organization, we ran a small farmer's market with reduced prices in order to expand the community's access to fresh produce. We worked closely with a local non-profit organization called People in Need. According to our contact within the organization, fresh produce had not been sold regularly in that area in several years. We also created a virtual farm series with a number of educational videos directed towards kids. We spent time adapting the activities that are often done at the annual farm camp into a virtual format for the video series so that kids could still experience them from home.

Some of the videos featured things like recipes, plant identification, harvesting techniques, and camp songs. We also recorded a virtual book series where we read Charlotte's Web. The last thing I worked on while I was at Stratford was developing educational activities focused on aquatics studies for the upcoming farm school program that the center is hosting this fall. In response to COVID, the organization is hosting day long camps for small groups of students who are learning virtually. I assisted with the development of activities that would help students reach the state educational standards for their grade level.

COVID-19

The initial description of the internship that I applied for was very different from the job I ended up doing. I was originally hired on to be an educational team lead for students attending the annual farm camp. However, because of COVID-19, the camp was cancelled. Luckily, Stratford was still able to employ me, and the other four education interns that were hired before the pandemic. Due to the strange circumstances, this internship looked different from how it has in the past and how it will probably look in the future. I was much more involved in the operational side of the farm than I would have been had the camp not been cancelled. However, I still learned a lot from the experience, and I found that the last-minute change challenged me to figure out how to adapt to the situation.



This is a picture of the internship team working with a few volunteers to collect hay. Hay is the primary source of food in the winter for the livestock on the farm. Hay is expensive, so it's critical that enough hay is collected in the summer. According to Jeff, the head farmer at Stratford, changes in the climate in recent years have made hay collection less productive, which has a big impact for small farms.

Behind the scenes of our educational video series



IS THIS INTERNSHIP FOR YOU?

One important thing to note about this internship is that it was very physically demanding. We worked outside for a full workday and were doing mostly physical labor. Even if the farm camp had happened as planned, this job would still require a good deal of physical capability. The farm is very large, and the nature preserve surrounding it includes several acres of forest. This would be a good job for someone who is a self starter and is good at working independently. The supervisors that I worked with had a very hands-off approach with their management, so it was important to be able to manage your own time well. The supervisors I worked with were also more than happy to assist us interns with projects or ideas that we came up with. However, we were encouraged to spear head our own projects and advocate for ourselves. This type of management is good for those who want to take on leadership roles and be work independently from time to time.

REFLECTION

This internship was valuable in a lot of ways, specifically with giving me some experiences to help me inform my future career choices. I got to gain some experience with community outreach, fundraising, physical labor, childhood education, agriculture, and environmental science.

I acquired many new skills and experiences that I can add to my resume. I was also exposed to some of the realities of different types of work, like the uncertainty of non-profit funding, the physical strength needed for agriculture, and the methods through which community partners are made. I don't know exactly what my career goals are at the moment, but this internship gave me a lot of information that will help me be informed in what steps I take. One big takeaway that I had from this experience was that I do enjoy working a physical job and learning practical skills and trades. This is helpful to know moving forward, because I am considering seeking out more jobs that would require physical labor. I would highly recommend this internship to other students. My experience was very unique, and I learned a wide range of valuable skills. To anyone considering working at this organization, I would also recommend volunteering if paid positions aren't immediately available.

Honey extraction and beehive maintenance



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