Internship Report: The Metropolitan Environmental Trust

The Metropolitan Environmental Trust (The M.e.t.) is one of the foremost environmental authorities in Tulsa, Oklahoma and the surrounding area. The M.e.t. started as a committee looking into alternatives to land filling in 1987, but soon focused on waste diversion and recycling. The M.e.t. is a public trust and with a mission to “develop and implement integrated and comprehensive solid waste management systems through cooperative efforts of participating governments.” Operating 11 recycling centers in its member communities, the M.e.t employs over 80 people with disabilities to staff the centers. The M.e.t. also began the first hazardous waste collection in Oklahoma in 1993, each year keeping thousands of tons of chemicals, toxins, and other wastes from entering landfills. Among other projects, The M.e.t. produces educational resources for community schools and non-profits as well as publishing an annual recycling directory.

Through the 8 weeks of my internship, I researched competitive pricing options for several of The M.e.t.’s expenses, taught students and teachers the importance of recycling and taking care of the earth through Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)-based curriculum, and began developing Tulsa Green STEM, an education program combining local environmental organizations and public schools. On my first day, my supervisor handed me a sheet of paper and asked me to price recycled bulbs and ballasts. I didn’t even know what a ballast was, but I did a quick bit a research and soon found a wealth of information about recycling PCB (hazardous) and non-PCB ballasts. I then set the prices that were used to launch The M.e.t.’s commercial bulb and ballast program by the end of the first week. I was shocked that I was given such a task within the first few hours of my internship. This pricing research and
the ones that followed showed me the importance of looking at a problem from every angle, especially in a non-profit situation where funding for new projects is limited.

As soon as my supervisor and the office manager discovered my background in environmental education, I was quickly assigned to teach all the student engagements for the summer. However, there was no program already set in place. Like most non-profits, The M.e.t. relies on volunteers and each one is enthusiastic about different aspects of recycling, so there was no formal program for each of them to follow. I spent the first two weeks sifting through the education resources already available at The M.e.t, picking out lesson plans that fit our mission and further reinforced the City of Tulsa’s recycling slogan “Focus on the Four” (meaning plastic, glass, paper, and aluminum). Since the City of Tulsa started a curbside recycling program in 2012, The M.e.t. has actively aided the city in making sure that the residents recycle properly. I wanted to make sure these lessons would become a standard for M.e.t. educators as they went to different venues, creating a cohesive curriculum between the different lessons. The last week of June, I was able to test my cohesive model by teaching local students at the “YMCA Summer Go!” afterschool program. Over the next 3 weeks, I visited over 800 students either 2 or 3 times. Each activity was a success, but definitely needed tweaking after each class I visited. It was great to see how all the preparation from the previous month lead to a successful program. I also used this information at “SENSE-sational Science,” to show 45 teachers how they can easily incorporate environmental education into their classrooms.

As I finished my educational outings, I began solid work on Tulsa Green STEM. My supervisor and the STEM Coordinator for Tulsa Public Schools wanted to launch a program that would actively coordinate engagements between regional schools and local environmental organizations (Environmental Partners). At the end of my internship I was able to create a
description of the program for schools and Environmental Partners, created a list of potential partners, contacted 24 organizations, scheduled a roundtable meeting for all available partners, and organized all pertinent information in an orderly manner for the person who will be hired to coordinate the Tulsa Green STEM program. This final project was the hardest to let go once my internship ended. I had put so many hours into preparing, organizing, and networking that it felt odd to not work on it anymore. I am excited to keep in touch and see how this new program develops, but I now understand the importance of giving my all to whatever task is placed in front of me, despite knowing that I will not be a part of the completed product. Due to the amount of work put into this project, The M.e.t. hired me part-time for an additional 2 weeks after the completion of my internship.

I have accomplished more in this one summer than I thought possible. Although I was never given any hard deadlines to follow, I saw how necessary it was to finish tasks in a timely manner. During school, I don’t necessarily wait to the last minute, but I also don’t use the full assigned time to work on a project or paper. I definitely will try to incorporate this work ethic into my studies in the coming year.

Beyond researching the curriculum I was teaching, I was given different tasks to complete each week that showed me the ins and outs of working for a non-profit. I didn’t mind working in the office, but I enjoyed the community interaction that came with my outreach engagements. I greeted community members at 2 recycling events, taught 800 children who knew me by name after the 3rd week, heard about the amazing projects put on by local public school teachers, and was able to meet face-to-face with several influential people in the Tulsa community. I can now see myself as an outreach coordinator. To gather and share the stories of how a non-profit impacts the community would be an amazing career to have.