

Summer Internship Report 2017

Jinni (Hangelina) Tran, C'17

Hometown: Atlanta



Echo-HEAL
Yucatan, Mexico

Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

Passionate about international public service, after I graduated from Sewanee (literally a day after), I interned for a local-global initiative called Echo Healing Environment and Lives (Echo-HEAL). A global movement from a community health perspective, Echo-HEAL is a conceptual framework and a community project started by a Fulbright scholar whose goal is optimize community health through a two-pronged approach, healing both the sacred environment and the diverse lives it supports. The program treats the pain points of pesticides and trash in San Crisanto, Mexico, while connecting the community Mayan values on sacredness of water and reverence for life. The long-term vision is to create a network of communities around the world that echo the movement, adapting the framework to their local environment and spiritual values.. Echo-HEAL's targeted audience are rural and underserved communities most affected by globalism and where youths are most vulnerable to desecration at the expense of the planet's and their own wellbeing. Specifically, it is working with the community located in San Crisanto, a 583-person fishing community on the southern coast of Mexico. Echo-HEAL addresses pollution pain points deteriorating both our inner and outer ecologies. Echo-HEAL's central tenets are to 1) transform pollution into source of healing for environment and to improve the health of its beneficiaries, including but not limited to humans, and 2) connect youth environmental stewardship with skill sharing and storytelling workshops by elders to fuse a physical and spiritual response.

As an intern for Echo-HEAL, I spent some of my time in the San Crisanto community and the other part of my trip in Merida. The central aspect of my work was doing outreach activities and living with the local residents. To summarize, I assisted with the following activities:

1) Conducted outreach activities: Rally community members and students to attend by stopping at the local school, convenience stores, and neighborhoods.

- 2) Helped my supervisor facilitate a meeting with the school leaders on her project and gained support from the school managers.
- 3) Created a website for Echo-HEAL where I posted relevant pictures and blogs. You can visit the website at <http://echoheal.weebly.com/>

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

The professional and technical skills that I strengthened from this internship experience are:

- Enhanced understanding of challenges in starting a community grassroots project in Third World /underdeveloped locales. For example, in San Crisanto, the local village lacks internet, and my supervisor and I had to commute to the city of Merida.
- Developing a visual lens to foster global participation and spread awareness. In the city, I was introduced to the faculty and helped my supervisor with organizing the project through social media tools. As mentioned before, I focus on taking meaningful pictures and blogged about my experience.
- Gaining diplomacy in navigating bureaucracy and administrations to find common ground and bring different stakeholders to collaborate. In San Crisanto, it is difficult to convene local communities together because many are occupied with other obligations or does not have the awareness or capacity. Thus, I learned from my supervisor how she connects with the community while at the same time invigorates the leaders to commit to the project.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?

At this internship, I utilized my education at Sewanee by integrating my political and Spanish knowledge with the environmental needs in the community. However, the issues that I helped solve at my internship were unique because this internship was abroad. One particular challenge was how to move the community forward in implementing the plans that Echo-Heal set out. My supervisor was having issues with gathering the school and community leaders on board. From my previous experience in organizing events at Sewanee, I suggested that we focus on mobilizing the participants- the youth- and leverage their enthusiasm and voice to motivate the rest of the community. If they are passionate about the project, then soon their parents and the community will be eager to know more and eventually participate. Additionally, providing incentives for participation is another factor I addressed. Thus, I came up with the idea of having T-shirts for the youth participants and helped my supervisor with the T-shirt designs. Additionally I suggested that assigning leadership positions to the students would make the students more accountable for the project as well as building on their leadership skills and experience. Another area that I particularly helped address was helping my supervisor looking for safe and cheap shelter when we traveled to San Crisanto, the place where we were supposed to stay had only one room with one hammock!

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

Because I was the only intern at that time, my teamwork consisted of me cooperating with my supervisor. Teamwork was strengthened by listening to my supervisor and understanding completely the overarching goals. If I had an idea, I would cite scholarly theories or articles to back up my proposals. As an intern, my job was to suggest, not recommend!

How did your internship affect your career plans?

This internship was challenging yet extremely rewarding. After this internship, I was even more inspired to sustain international connections with local communities abroad. Consequently, I accepted

the Fulbright offer to teach abroad in Mexico for a year. During my time there, I hope to come back to San Crisanto as often as I can.

In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons' perspectives?

As an intern for working for Echo-HEAL, I was privileged to explore the community of San Crisanto. The excursion was important as it exposed to me the key challenges the community faces, and how Echo-HEAL can alleviate some of the issues.

At first, I was taken aback by how friendly people were and I was hesitant to approach people. However, having successfully participated in international outreach trips with Sewanee in Quito, Ecuador, I reminded myself to be extremely friendly and to treat myself not as an outsider but an insider (I did grow up in a Latino community back home).

As the days passed, by utilizing my Spanish and putting myself out there, I became familiarized with the town and fell in love with the people and the little things that the village offers.

From the people, I learned that in San Crisanto, community and simple living are strong but health and education needs improvement. Walking around the community, I saw environmental and health challenges that Echo-HEAL seeks to address. One the environmental side, trash- especially plastics- are ubiquitous and are not properly recycled. One the health side, the consumption of products that use plastics such as Coke is highly popular among residents. From this observation, I believe that by actively engaging its resident to recycle plastics, Echo-HEAL will motivate residents to reflect on their own consumption of plastics.

One of my favorite aspects is its people. The senoras who we stayed with were warm and caring. Their laughter can shake the entire town and homemade food were scrumptious. One of the residents, Don Miguel, gave me a free tour around the famous mangroves. Additionally, the students that we are working with showed much enthusiasm. Seeing how positive the community interacts with her, I believe that Echo-HEAL is an impactful grassroots approach where change starts with people in the community.

Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?

In terms of housing, try Airbnb or just walk around asking locals for cheap and safe rentals or hotels. Remember to convert your money into local currency if you are going abroad and notify your bank. Additionally, make sure to take pictures and/or do vlogs, because the chance is, you won't have the exact opportunity and experience again!

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:

Words cannot express my appreciation and how grateful I am for your help. This experience has been immensely meaningful and guided my future aspiration, including embarking on a Fulbright journey. I believe that projects such as San Crisanto serves as a powerful ground for the application of strategic visions that ultimately will pave the way for sustainable developing communities in the future, a place where we can work to preserve simple living while reversing the consequences of excess of consumerism. Thanks to your donation and support: we are moving planet Earth towards a better and safer future.