

Lea Dyga
Statement of Purpose
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Born and raised in Muskegon, Michigan, I was surrounded by Lake Michigan's mighty waves and immense sand dune. Neighboring these scenic landscapes were the artifacts of industrial exploitation, abandonment and wealth disparities. This dissonance colored my early education with the contemporary consequences of historic racism, economic instability, and ecological disregard. My peers and I were not only forced to confront these inequities at a young age, but reckon with the impending climate crisis which propels many ecologists today. Carrying these contexts with me, I was motivated to build a complete understanding of this global moment to best inform me in decisions making and discussion around environmental resilience and justice. These principles shaped my undergraduate and extra-curricular journey. While my studies focused on ecological fundamentals and environmental biology, I sought work that would enhance my understanding of community sustainability, immersed myself in environmental activism, and pursued undergraduate research in economic development. By weaving together concepts from each of these experiences, I aimed to build a scope of expertise that allows me to progress community sustainability, environmental justice, and ecological resilience.

My interdisciplinary understandings were first tested during my fellowship with the Michigan Student Power Network. This grassroots organization seeks to advance justice by elevating and empowering community organizers across the state. This fellowship gave me space and resources to explore techniques for progressing environmental justice, informed by the social, economic, and ecological understanding I had built. During the fellowship, I committed myself to approaching justice, equity, and inclusion as an accomplice and to deepening my knowledge of the historic and modern context of oppression. I focused on developing relational organizing skills and a community education and outreach pedagogy. Much of my organizing efforts centered around developing meaningful solutions to ecological degradation while thoughtfully identifying socio-economic factors that may impact implementation or effectiveness. I learned how to navigate unfamiliar and uncomfortable spaces with empathy and open ears. As we seek equity and inclusion, this ability helps me honor the voices of my community and combat tokenism. This fellowship helped put into practice knowledge I gained during my undergraduate degree and reaffirmed my devotion to environmental justice.

Upon entering my career field, I spent nearly a year as an environmental educator with the Grand Traverse Conservation District. In this community facing position, my mantra became "if you can't explain it simply then you don't understand it well enough." To this note, I witnessed my effectiveness improve as I began to study topics deeply and pursued training and certifications, such as the MDARD Michigan Mushroom Identification Expert certification. I took pride in my ability to offer guidance in the face of wicked problems and to know a topic deeply enough that I can demystify them for the public. It became clear to me the potential impact I could have if I continued on this path of self-education. I believe a graduate degree from The Evergreen State College will further my ability to bring ecological understanding and intervention to my community. In all, it is my aim to contribute my interdisciplinary knowledge to The Evergreen State College while immersing myself in environmental studies in the pursuit of equipping myself, and thus my community, with the best information and skills to tackle ecological degradation.