

Sophia Gum

The Gros Ventre Mountain Range is nestled between the Grand Teton and the Wind River Range of Wyoming. Historically home to the East Shoshone and Crow Indigenous peoples, it now remains naturally intact as a national forest and federal wilderness. In the summer of 2021, I worked as a ranch hand in the valley located ten miles into the range on the west boundary. Every day I explored this land to experience what it had to offer. The daily commute of rolling sagebrush hills and crimson-red fertile soil was emblematic of what was left undeveloped and unspoiled by vapid modern industrial expansion. With the view of jagged limestone mountain peaks and cirque glacier remnants constantly towering over me, I felt minute and mundane within this wilderness. Consumed by this landscape, I was overcome with a deep-rooted motherly urge to protect this land which has bestowed so much to me. This fueled a drive for stewardship and conservation for the Earth and all that it provides. The idea of suburbias or crude oil fields effacing sacred lands with vast, intertwined ecosystems such as these terrified me. The destruction of biodiversity in the name of modern “progress,” the poisoning of these prolific but fragile landscapes, and the disavowal of the interspecies dependence on these ecosystems lit a fire underneath me to not only learn about the environment, but also provide sustainable solutions for the future. Upon my arrival back home in Texas, I switched majors and entered the environmental science program at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) with a concentration in sustainability.

Over the past three years with the program, my studies have been significantly interdisciplinary; from geography and geology to sociology and biology, I gained not only comprehension of environmental science, but the program’s multidisciplinary approach allowed me to gain knowledge in foundational sectors: the environment, society, and economics. These

three sectors were significantly important to sustainability, as they serve as necessary criteria in finding modern solutions to global problems. Consequently, I articulated and honed my interests specifically in environmental justice and sustainable development of energy and infrastructure. Being in a tight-knit department, my professors encouraged and worked with me to create my own projects and facilitate community outreach on campus. Since late spring, I have been a member of SHSU's sustainability committee which consists of faculty, professors, and students who are passionate about meaningful changes on campus that encourage environmental protection.

My activity with the sustainability committee has been influenced by my previous employment as a barista at the university campus' Starbucks cafe franchised by Aramark, a third-party company which oversees the university's restaurants and dining halls. Every day, pounds of expired or outdated food would be discarded directly into landfill trash cans. Despite Aramark's claimed "promise of zero food waste," I saw firsthand how much waste generation was occurring. To make matters worse, employees were prohibited from taking home expired food, for reasons unexplained to us but enforced through the threat of termination. I found myself in a position to blow the whistle and expose these business practices, but also wanted to find a solution to this concern that was not only sustainable but benefited the company so the proposal would be less likely to be disregarded. I began researching other campuses that had found resolutions to food waste, then proceeded to reach out and interview people from their sustainability offices via Zoom. Representatives from the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Connecticut explained their processes along with ideas on how to create mine.

Although I was forewarned about the difficulty of changing internal policies due to the lease agreements between the university and the third-party company, the representatives encouraged me to go forth with my research and involve the community's opinion and involvement. They supported my discussion and allowed me to continue to communicate with them on suggestions and critiques of what should be done. I joined the Sustainability Committee shortly thereafter, and have since been working with them for solutions, such as incorporating the local food pantry and community garden to cut down on waste going directly into the local landfill. The engagement between outside sources, my professors, on-campus organizations, and the committee has led me to pursue graduate studies in sustainable development to surround myself with further academic and research possibilities that will provide solutions to these modern-day problems.

The interdisciplinary focus of the Masters of Environmental Studies program is one of the primary reasons why I chose to apply to Evergreen State College. I have found that as an environmental scientist, incorporating a variety of academic perspectives and analytical approaches enables deeper comprehension and effective practice.. Though objective and empirical data is of the utmost importance when it comes to the sciences, subjective data provides a nuance to complement and interpret the results. This foundation has equipped me with the skills necessary to address complex issues from multiple perspectives, fostering innovative solutions that consider both scientific and social dimensions. My research interest areas such as environmental justice, which heavily involves sociological perception along with ecological implications, require this cross-disciplinary approach to fully comprehend and accurately master my course of study. I am particularly drawn to the emphasis on collaborative and community-based projects that your university has to offer to further my research. My

experiences working with diverse teams have taught me the value of collaboration and the importance of considering multiple perspectives, and I am eager to contribute to the rich academic community that Evergreen holds.

Additionally, the opportunity to work with esteemed faculty members whose research aligns with my interests is a significant draw for me. I am especially excited about the prospect of contributing to ongoing research initiatives regarding environmental justice at Evergreen and furthering my knowledge under the guidance of experts in the field. My interdisciplinary background, research experience, and commitment to collaborative problem-solving make me confident in my ability to thrive in your program. I am eager to contribute to the vibrant academic community at Evergreen State College and embark on a journey of academic and personal growth in the pursuit of environmental science.