

The Relativity of Meaningful: Abby Benson 2024 Splash Park Coordinator Internship Notes

College students live their lives constantly on a quest to gain meaningful experience relative to their future job field. Educators seem to not be able to stress enough the benefit of hands-on experience. Finding an internship can be a stress inducing process, as the job market for college students is competitive. Following my freshman year at St. Thomas, I began applying my way through various recruitment platforms like Handshake or Indeed at positions that seemed to match my future. From lobbyist firms to judicial offices, everyone seemed to be looking for what I was not. Many wanted juniors or seniors, and for the interviews I got, it was clear I did not have enough related classes under my belt to be competent in the role. I changed my settings on the job search platforms, widening positions from what I thought my “field” was. Just like that, ten minutes away from my hometown, an internship popped up in an unlikely place: Princeton, Minnesota.

Initially, I applied for the marketing internship, as I really did not know what “Splash Park Coordinator” entailed. Quite honestly, the word marketing seemed like it would offer the most “meaningful experience” I was searching for. Stacy told me that the marketing internship had already been filled, but she said I should apply for the Splash Park Coordinator internship. Thinking about myself working at a Splash Park when I was supposed to find a law-related position was humorous, but I applied. I didn’t think much would come out of my role compared to what some of my peers were doing, but I have never been more wrong.

This internship combines a multitude of fields, offering me insight into so many potential futures. The most prevalent are government, managerial, business, marketing, and service. Yet under these I can see into the fields of law, finance, accounting, sales, and so much more. In this reflection, I will attempt to outline just how much I get to do in my role.

As the Splash Park Coordinator, I manage a group of eight 14 to 16 year old kids that work at the Splash Park. Yet to be a manager, I need to understand their jobs first and foremost. In my first summer, this was a bit of a learning curve, as I was supposed to answer questions about a place I had never worked. Opening weekend, I shadowed each of the attendants for both an opening, and a closing shift. Not only did this help me learn the job with the attendants, but learn about the attendants as well. Very quickly, it became apparent that establishing a rapport with each of the kids I would be managing was essential to things running smoothly. If they felt comfortable with me, they would be more likely to ask questions when they needed and tell me when things went wrong. It was also important that they liked working, for obvious reasons, and to enjoy a job, comfort is high on the priority list. Really knowing the attendants also allowed me to make better decisions about who could handle higher pressure shifts and meticulous tasks. I also was able to know on my off days who was more likely to need help; for these people I kept better watch over my work phone.

After about two weeks, most attendants had the job pretty well under control. With the shadowing and my regular duties, I worked a lot these first few weeks. I also worked shifts every weekend for the first few weeks. For the opening shift, the most daunting task the attendants face is testing the water. This seems ominous but is actually pretty easy. It is just like an experiment in science class, follow the directions, and you will get the correct result. If the water is ever off, the attendants need to contact public works to fix the chemicals. The most important thing to remember, though, is that there is a large margin of error with the water chemicals. This means they can be pretty off target,

but still be safe. It is always best to retest first if anything is wrong. Most of the time it is a testing error. This year, we added Filter PSI and Flow Rate. These numbers are located in the water pump room.

Scheduling the attendants is one of my favorite parts of the job. This feels like a fun puzzle to complete every Monday. Always schedule each day after checking Squarespace for events, and have Stacy review the schedule before you publish it. I made a document for scheduling shifts and used the times for the type of day. AM party, PM party, AM and PM party, regular, free, etcetera all have different variations of shifts. Shifts must also align with attendant availability. They must submit availability forms or text me about time off at least before the next schedule comes out. If they want to switch shifts after the schedule has been published, they need to get it covered themselves. It is most useful for them to have a group chat together where they ask others for coverage. It is important to keep in mind the laws for minors working in Minnesota. Someone under 16 cannot cover someone's shift when they already work that day, as 8 hours is the max working hours in one day for that age group.

The closing shift must empty all the garbage cans in the park, which takes a while, but the task with the most errors at night is counting the money. The opening shift simply counts, where the closing shift must count and take out that day's cash profit. The easiest way to explain this to the kids is to take the total cash amount minus \$250 (what we keep in the till at all times). Whatever number this gets is what they put in the envelope and bring to city hall. There will definitely be issues with this right away, but everyone picks it up after a few shifts. It is important for them to remember, the amount they put in the envelope should use as many big bills as possible. That is, take out 20's first, then 10's, 5's, and so on. For example, to make \$66, they should take 3 twenties, 1 five, and 1 one. Keeping enough change in the till is hard enough with proper change, let alone when the kids make mistakes here. Most weeks, I go to the bank 2 or 3 times to make change for the Splash Park. I have a reserve of \$250 that I keep with me to replenish the park, and I consistently make change for my reserve.

With our daily reports, we can see there is normally a variation of a few dollars due to counting errors. When there are large discrepancies, in this number, there are two likely potential causes. If we are largely over what we should have, this means someone was forgetting to mark transactions in the point of sale system. This can be easy to do if we are busy. If we are short large amounts, this means someone took money out of the till. This did not happen this year. Every time there is a discrepancy in money, I write down who worked that day and follow up. Sometimes this is just a fluke, but when it happens enough with the same individual, we can be confident it is not random. While unfortunate, these things do happen. Having hard conversations with attendants is something I struggle with. I like to be liked, which you cannot always be when acting as a manager. I would like to think I became a professional at getting my point across in a lighthearted manner for first-issue conversations. If issues persist, I become increasingly stern.

Difficult conversations also arise with the public. Whether via Facebook or at the park itself, I have had to eloquently explain why things are the way they are while validating the concerns of the individual. If these people knew the way our park ran, they would not be upset about charging \$4 admissions. Explanations can go a long way in the minds of the public. Even in answering the phones at City Hall, people would come at you with anger. Taking a step back and remembering these are the people we serve helps to address their concerns in a patient way. Sometimes, people are appreciative of

us. These people love the park and the free day sponsorships. Their gratitude outweighs any and all negative interactions.

Keeping the Splash Park well stocked is another task of mine. This is something you just get a feel for after a while. How much merchandise sells has to do with the weather, day of the week, and time of year. We get things from different places, so this impacts stocking as well. Orange pop seems to only be sold at Coborn's and gets restocked in threes, so if you ever see it there, buy everything they have. We order Twix, Original Skittles, Wild Berry Skittles, Sour Skittles, Peanut Butter M&M's, and Sunscreen on Amazon. Because it needs to ship, this is important to stay on top of. We order all pop besides root beer and orange from Dylan at the Liquor store. These orders must be in by Monday by 12. Everything else is sold at Walmart. I record every purchase with the credit card use and documentation forms.

Additionally, I follow the finance reports for the Splash Park all summer. I watch to see which items are selling, which items are not, and whether or not the till matches our point of sale system, as I pointed out earlier. We need to ensure we are making money on the items we sell and can sort through reports on Square. I also come up with promotions, like free freezie day or end-of-the season sales. This year, we gave out free family passes for a duck photo contest. Through a date, people sent in photos with the baby duck parked in front of the Splash Park. Then, we posted all of the photos together, and the one with the most likes won the pass. This actually got a lot of engagement, and I would recommend doing something like this again.

There are random tasks that come up for the Splash Park as well. Some examples of this could be filling in a hole with top soil, setting up an attendant to paint a door, or filling tires on the surrey bike. Being flexible and a problem solver is essential. I also tackled a number of tasks around the office. One job Emma and I shared this year was organizing the large road maps, plats, utilities maps, and ½ section maps. This was quite the task, taking us around a month to complete. We looked through each individual piece of paper to remove copies and label where it belongs. Another task I had was filing permits. This took place just in my spare time; this was good because it is a tedious and boring process. I also got an estimate of how many pieces of paper are stored in City Hall. It sounds crazy, but I counted the number of pieces of paper per inch of filing cabinet in three drawers and got an average of this number. Then, I measured and recorded every filing cabinet we had and multiplied that number by my per inch estimate. Not including the basement, there are approximately 242,549 sheets of paper filed. Landscaping was also a task Emma and I helped Stacy with. We spread woodchips and planted shrubs in front of the building.

Another task was helping other departments with marketing. Emma did most of this as she was the marketing intern this year, but last year I did a lot of it. Her and I also did some things together, like running the Police department's booth at the fair. She and I helped each other out with delegating our tasks; sometimes I would make a poster or check out the surrey bike for her when she wasn't available. In return, she would bring things to the Splash Park or check in with the attendants when I was gone. We graduated high school together, and this was a wonderful experience to reconnect. Last year, I was not as close with the marketing intern, but having this relationship really made the job more fun. I would highly recommend getting to know the other intern, as helping one another is so useful.

While marketing fell more to Emma this year, I still made some of the posters for business sponsored free days. This is fun when they trickle in, but when there is a multitude of sponsors at once,

it can feel overwhelming. In spare time, I browsed Canva for templates I liked so it would be easy to do when someone sponsored. Printing posters also offered a challenge. The printer chooses to throw a fit frequently, and it is important to be on top of printing in case you have any issues. I also made many of the signs for the Splash Park, but this year was much easier as we reused signs from the previous year.

A large part of my position was running the Splash Park Facebook page. I usually schedule posts two weeks in advance to save myself stress. I post a large grouped post on Sunday nights with all the free days for the week, and then post the day before each free day as well as the day of each free day. I also make sure to tag the business that sponsors the free day. These posts then get shared to the bulletin boards, City Facebook, and Age Friendly Facebook. Most of the time I end up having at least a post a day. At some point in the summer, it is fun to post our concession menu as people like to see the low prices. Additionally, it is great to do attendant interviews. This consists of a post with a photo of the attendant and the answers to some questions like “What extracurricular activities do you participate in?” or “What is your favorite class in school?” I forgot to do these this year, but it was a hit on Facebook last year.

Sometimes, I attended Park Board meetings or City Hall meetings. These, along with working at City Hall, really outline the interworking's of government. This understanding is important not only for a Political Science major like myself but for every single person who votes and participates within their city. Civic engagement is an important aspect of our democratic system, and following this internship, it has become even higher on my personal priority list.

This year, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to shadow Damien Toven, the City Attorney, as well as Maren Magill, an attorney at Taft law firm. Stacy set these experiences up for me so I could begin to discern the area of law I am most interested in. I cannot even begin to express how helpful these days were for me, and how grateful I am to have a boss willing to go out of her way to help me succeed in life.

Here we are, two summers after my initial application, when I was worrying about getting the “right” opportunity, I sit writing my last reflection. Meaningful experience is relative. This internship has provided me with an unbelievable amount of practice and knowledge in so many different fields. No day is twin to the last, which makes this even more fun. Whenever I tell professors, peers, family members, or other employers about what I did at the City of Princeton, they are always amazed at the amount of experience I gained. On top of this, I have created invaluable networks with the people around me in Princeton. I would not trade this for anything. The most meaningful internship I could have had is this experience, and I am so thankful I did not chase the conventional definition of “meaningful work experience.”

Thank you so much, City of Princeton.

Abby Benson (2024 Splash Park Coordinator)