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Final Report: BrightSpark and Alumni Relations Internship

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Dr. Barbara Bruce

ARTHUM Internship Credit

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Final Report

CEL 0.5 Credit with Brightspark Canada

I am consistently amazed at my capacity to plan out a detailed future for myself, step by step, and then later derail my own by progress by acquiring a new interest and immediately developing a new plan. Such is life, I know, but the list of possible futures that I have created for myself is extensive and truly, truly messy. One such plan that could very well still happen involves my potential future at Brightspark Canada, an educational travel company. In the twelfth grade, I was introduced to the idea of getting paid to travel, and since then, I knew that being a Brightspark tour leader was necessary in order to start making this dream a reality.

My initial interest in this job stemmed from more than just the travel aspect. From what I had deduced, Brightspark tour leaders were brilliant, organized, and focused individuals. They knew the details of their destination cities inside and out, they were encyclopedias of Canadian and American history, and they were powerful and engaging speakers. They were everything I wanted to be, possessing all of the qualities that I believed would make for a good employee across all kinds of careers. At seventeen, I knew with a fierce certainty that I would do whatever it took to work for this company.

Choosing to designate Brightspark as the first half of my internship credit completely changed how I approached the experience. Further labeling it as a community engaged learning “assignment” would also help to shape my understanding of my role within the community and the students I engaged with. Right from the start of my application process, I knew that Brightspark was going to be unlike any job that I had held before. First, I provided a detailed resume of experience, complete with a headshot and a creative format in an attempt to hopefully set me apart from the crowd – something that was definitiely SASAH inspired. A handful of application questions accompanied the resume submission, asking me to detail my travel experience, a funny or unique thing about myself (how vague!), and why I believed myself to be a great potential tour guide. I was then invited to Brightspark’s head office in Etobicoke for an interview, the first in my life that I spent more than day preparing for. I recall watching videos on YouTube filled with interview tips, writing out potential questions on my Greyhound ride to the city, and blasting *The Greatest Showman* soundtrack on repeat in order to keep myself inspired. I sat, sweating, for at least an hour in the lobby of the building, memorizing every face that passed me by, thinking to myself, *Is that my future employer?* Needless to say, I was perfectly prepared for my interview and left the office with the knowledge that I had crushed it. I completed it all with handwritten thank you cards for both my interviewer and the secretary who had been so nice to me, something that I later received praise for as it was *extra kind and thoughtful*. Following the individual interview came a group interview, and finally, two full weekends of in-office training surrounded by forty other potential junior tour guides. Though everyone had technically been offered the job at this point, not everyone made it through training, and I was proud to know that I had excelled as I was given one of the first tours of the season.

Ten tours in ten weeks brought me a lot of hours in transit, upwards of 12,000 kilometres of travel, and hundreds of kids safely transported to and from destinations. What began as an exciting, yet fearful endeavour quickly bloomed into something challenging and thrilling the more I toured. I noticed the most progress in my speech and ability to deliver historical destination spiels: where my sentences had previously been filled with frequent interjections such as *um*, *like*, and *uhhhhh*, was now the absence of these *qrxls*. My words sounded practiced, but not memorized. I had developed a flow to my speeches that allowed me to build off of the energy the students provided me with. This, I quickly learned, was integral to the facilitation of an enjoyable tour for myself, the teachers, and the students. While some of my early groups hung onto my every word, several of my later tours proved to be rowdy, difficult, and disinterested in the educational aspect of their trip. I felt appropriately challenged by these groups, and though I didn't expect to, I still learned a lot from them. I began to understand that my worth as a tour leader was not dependant on how *hip with the kids* I was, or even how much they liked me. Some students were intent on not having a good time, and surprisingly, some teachers were as well. At the end of the day, this job taught me that it was *just that* – a job, and not one that I needed to break my back over changing the minds of those who could not be swayed. Fundamentally, I was still a student, I was travelling at least 4 days out of the week, and I had become responsible for the lives of fifty different students every week. Sometimes, it was enough to simply conduct my work safely and according to plan.

Among the obvious progression of my public speaking and communication abilities, my experience with Brightspark also taught me how to stand up for myself. I have been yelled at by hotel and restaurant vendors, the occasional teacher, and even students. While it was critical that I remain calm and professional, I sometimes blurred the line between professional and passive. I

know I have rights as an employee and that the most important one is to be treated fairly as a person. However, at times it felt so ingrained that my tour groups needed to love me, that my teachers had to give me *amazing* feedback, that they are *paying customers and the customer is always right* that I struggled with having a backbone. On one of my first tours to Quebec City, a student was feeling emotional and overwhelmed (likely due to the day's travel) and had been yelling at his friends. I approached him and, in tears, he continuously yelled at me to go away and leave him alone. After a few moments, I understood that I could not help him and that, technically, it wasn't a part of my job. I said to him, "I don't appreciate you speaking to me like that," which seemed to stun him a little, and then went to find a better suited adult to help him. Part of developing this backbone was knowing that I was constantly supported and had an amazing team behind me back at headquarters. If a vendor approached me and said that more money was owed for a meal than originally planned, or that our agreed upon activity package *didn't* actually include what we thought it did, my senior tour leader was just a phone call away. It didn't take long to learn that, because I am young and look it, adults in the industry will assume that I can be easily taken advantage of. For the sake of myself, my tour group, and even Brightspark, I couldn't just roll over because an adult was yelling at me, as tempting as it was at times. While maintaining that professionalism, I managed to explain myself and my understanding of the situation on multiple accounts, and when the vendor chose to escalate it, I would make a phone call and straighten things out. Conflict resolution wasn't something that I had expected to be important to this position and it turned out to be one of my greatest strengths by the end of it. My practice in customer service through years of working in the food and beverage industry taught me how to be polite and adapt, but my time with Brightspark taught me how to stand up for myself.

The summative and written reflections allowed me to reflect on this development of a backbone. Tours can happen in such a rush, students' faces and locations and memories all blurring together in one, ultra-fast-paced summer. Sitting down every three weeks to really consider my experiences and the problems I encountered made it possible for me to watch myself grow. Looking back on these written reflections, I can see how I approached the tour season with fear, enthusiasm, and a little bit of naivety. By the end of my season, though I can recall being both excited and saddened, I can now see how the stress was weighing on me. I wrote about a particularly bad tour to Quebec City in the latter half of my season. Though the teacher to student ratio was my best yet, the teachers proved to be less than helpful when it came to organizing the disruptive, disrespectful bunch that I discovered upon climbing up the bus steps. They cared little for my educational spiels, they were constantly demanding I make changes to the itinerary, and they were rude to waitstaff wherever we ate. By day two, I was exhausted and upset. In hindsight, this is where I could have worked harder to make the tour its best, but I had become stubborn. I had a solid track record of great tours behind me and so I felt as though I knew what it took to make a great tour, and what was happening on this trip just wasn't it. I didn't *really* consider how the students were feeling – it was as though the majority of them lacked empathy for me, and therefore, I would not be empathetic towards them. They were a ragtag group of split classes from a not-so-great community and school, and I hardly stopped to consider what this would mean for them. While my best tours were always *go go go* with back-to-back action and fun, this group was lazy and uninterested. And still, I was determined to carry out the itinerary as planned, as though that would make it better. Looking back, I know that this was not the right way to go about things. Upon realizing the group's energy and interest levels, I should have sat down with the teachers and determined a new

itinerary that would make *everyone* happy. Knowing what I do now, I realize this stemmed from a not-yet-perfected ability to adapt and a stubbornness to continue with a system that I believed to be “foolproof”. It taught me that tours are not one-size-fits all and sometimes, not everyone is going to love you and that’s okay. It is a part-time job, after all.

Maintaining this academic approach to my work allowed me to experience it not only as an employee, but as a student. I was able to take the skills I have learned in class (critical thinking, group management and teamwork, and professional communication) and bring them into the work force in a less than traditional fashion. Now, if someone were to ask me “What are you going to do with an Arts degree?” I have even *more* potential answers to give them. I can travel the world, teach history, and talk to people for hours at a time about old buildings and dead people. When it came time to prepare my final presentation, I was surprised to see how much of a distant memory Brightspark felt like. Re-reading my reports proved necessary in recounting both the good and the bad times and ultimately reminded me why I wanted this job in the first place. It truly was everything that I had expected it to be (difficult, rewarding, magical) and so much more (challenging, inspiring, life-changing), and I have since seriously considered a role with this company in my future.

Attempting to sum up my experience at Brightspark in three and a half minutes was difficult, to say the least. There was so much I wanted to touch on, so much that I felt needed explaining, but I needed to be concise. Looking back, I don’t even know if I properly explained my role within the company and what exactly I *did* for them – at this point, I have talked about it so much with everyone I know that I have forgotten how to explain the work to someone who *doesn’t* know. I will always begin with, “Did you ever go on an eighth-grade graduation trip to Ottawa or Quebec City? Yeah, it’s like that.” But if they answer *no*? I’m helpless. Ultimately, I

highlighted what I believed to be important so that, just maybe, I inspired some little first year to one day go on and do what I did. I completed 10 tours in 10 weeks, I spent over one hundred hours in transit, and I safely travelled more than 12,000 kilometres. I was *on* for days at a time – acting at 125% for the duration of any trip and sustaining myself off of tour leader discounted food at OnRoutes. While the job wasn't *all* fun and games, it was mostly fun. Most importantly, I met a *ton* of amazing people, most of whom I will probably never see again, and that's okay. This job really showed me how temporary people can be, but that's not always a bad thing. Sometimes they pop in for a short while just to teach you something new or make you feel a certain way, and then they leave. And that's it. You carry them with you in your memories and you look back on them fondly, and that's all, but it's okay that that's all. I learned a lot in one season, and though COVID-19 interrupted my plans of returning this past summer, I know I will always have a space there if it is a job I wish to pursue. Gathering all of my resources, photos, and facts encouraged me to consider how the first half of my credit differed from the last. While polar opposites at first sight, I was able to successfully transfer skills that I had acquired with Brightspark into my time at the Dean's Office, something I hope to have made evident in my presentation.

Internship. 0.5 Credit with the Dean's Office of Arts and Humanities

In what was perhaps a twisted method of self-defence, I got involved with an Arts and Humanities publication known as *Spotlight* in my first year at Western. The goal of the student-run publication is to introduce students to faculty alumni so that they can begin to consider the possibilities of their own Arts and Humanities degrees. *This is perfect*, I remember thinking.

Now, when my family inevitably asks me again what on Earth are you going to do with that? I will actually have an answer! Fast forward a year, and I am the editor in chief of the publication and in constant contact with a wide variety of young professionals. Skip forward *another* year, and I am applying for a position within the dean's office and this past experience is what allows me to get my foot in the door.

Though the skills I developed through my Alumni Research and Outreach position are comparable to those I acquired with Brightspark, the jobs were fundamentally different. I went from working "in the field" to "in the office", a shift that I was both hesitant and excited to make. On the one hand, this would be very tangible experience that would look great on a resume and prepare me for what would realistically be my future career. But on the other, I wasn't sure I would actually enjoy working in an office environment. It was very...stationary, and I had just come off of a summer of traveling around the province and acting like a kid again. It was not so much the professional aspects of the job that worried me, but the self-motivation. Much of my work (my research, database training, and outreach) was to be done on my own time. So, perhaps even worse than what I had expected, I was not in an office – I was in my own home, and I would need to turn it into a productive workspace.

Along with learning to motivate myself, I also had to learn to juggle the extra responsibility that I was tasked with. It is very easy to do (or not do) my homework, write my essays on time, or finish my readings. I needed to make sure that these poor habits weren't seeping over into my work with Jessica. Part of what made the position so exciting and full of potential was the sheer amount of responsibility I was entrusted with. I could decide who to reach out to and when, I would be in charge of organizing client meetings with Jessica, and I could essentially "poach" any willing alumni for future years of *Spotlight*.

The pace of our work picked up in the latter half of the semester when, in addition to our weekly outreach, we were preparing for the Annual Arts Alumni Mixer and getting *Spotlight* ready for print. This was a time in which I really began to question my abilities and whether or not I had truly been doing a good job. My feedback from Jessica was consistently pleasant and yet, I stressed under the weight of the Mixer event. She saw this as a great opportunity for me to take the reins and dictate what needed to be done and by whom. *I* saw this as the perfect chance to demonstrate how overwhelmed and under the weather I had been feeling. Jessica told *me* to tell *her* what to do. As you can imagine, this was difficult for me. As much as I knew that she would do whatever I needed, it was hard to place myself in a position of authority. I second-guessed every decision I made – were the cocktail tables too far apart? Was the order all wrong? What should our transition music be? Would I need my script? Why was I sweating so much!? What is this *coronavirus* thing that is suddenly going around? And then, suddenly, the event had started, students were gushing about all of the amazing people they got to meet, and alumni were praising me for my organization and execution. And Jessica stood there with a knowing look on her face as if to say, *I told you so*.

It was difficult, in times like this, to have faith in myself. Ultimately, I still feel like a child working under authoritative figures. I am so used to being told what to do, where to go, and whether or not what I'm doing is right. While it was refreshing work a self-motivated and sometimes self-guided job, it was also worrisome. After all, I was dealing with some big-name clients and some large figures – while the “fate” of things wasn't resting on my shoulders, it still felt as though a simple typo in an email, or a too-eager sounding phone call could sway the decision of a donor.

The pandemic brought about uncertain changes as was expected. Unable to have in-person meetings, my work as Jessica's scheduling assistant shifted mildly. We began undertaking research for future projects that, unfortunately, would have no definitive timeline. This work was more laid back, less time sensitive, and more focused on the relationship building aspect of the position. This I enjoyed a lot. It gave me a chance to interact with graduates in a more low-key scale, inquire about their time at Western and what they had been up to as of late, as well as if they would ever be interested in coming back to support undergraduates through things like *Spotlight* and the Mixer. This work continued until well into May, where I had no idea if my contract had ended or not, but I was still happy to be helping out. Jessica had hinted at a potential extension of my contract in the fall, but obviously, some things just don't go as planned and that's okay.

I learned a lot about fundraising in those few months, perhaps most importantly that it is not something I want to spend the rest of my life doing. Jessica was practically a detective – she could meet someone, sit down for coffee with them, and in less than an hour, suss out their capacity to donate to the university. As much I wanted to be *this cool*, I realized I had minimal interest in dealing with numbers so large. It was...disheartening, at times, to see and deal with the excess of money that some people have. I was actively working four jobs at the time of this internship in order to pay my tuition – but there were families out there who could donate by the hundreds of thousands without make a dent in their fortunes but needed to be convinced in order to do so. Additionally, I struggled with simply *asking people for money* (probably because of my own issues) and found it hard to push people to reconsider if I was rejected. Who was I to decide what someone should and should not do with their spending money? Ultimately, I learned a lot from this position. And yes, some of it helped me determine specifically what I did not wish to

see myself doing in the future, but it also helped me to consider what aspects I really did enjoy. Working with people (both in the dean's office and connecting with alumni) was thrilling every day. I really loved the idea of slowly getting to know something and then building a foundation with similar goals in mind: helping Arts and Humanities students. It was always easy to gush to alumni about my own time in undergrad, but it was even more enjoyable to ask them about their own and see what wisdom they had to offer. At times, it was like I was hoarding their brilliance for myself, little tidbits of knowledge that I packed away and would save for later like, "It's okay if these aren't the best four years of your life," or "If you really want something, then you will find a way to make it happen, and it's as simple as that." These were just a few of the many things that I carried with me as I left the position. Although everything continues to be one giant question mark, I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to work so closely with professionals in the Western community. Not only have I grown as a student, built my personal network, and forged new relationships, but I have also been encouraged to think seriously about my future post-graduation. Having tangible experience has shown me how to shape my skills to suit whatever career path I may follow.

In fact, my experience proved to be relevant much more quickly than I expected. I was laid off from my restaurant job last month due to a lack of customers and soon after applied for a job at the Martial Arts gym I was going to. They were looking for "Membership Consultants", AKA people to bring in new athletes, show them around, and get them enrolled. With zero sales experience outside of selling cold chimichangas and beer, I figured, *why not?* I am a member, maybe they will like me because of it. My first interview went surprisingly well! I could tell I had surprised the manager with my preparedness and thoughtful answers, things I had been able to develop from undergoing the difficult application processes of some of my previous jobs. My

interview was then sent to the owners, who watched it, told me they like it, and booked a second interview with me with another sales guru. I went into this interview expecting to be grilled – Indeed had informed me that more than 80 people had applied for this job. Who was I to get it? One of the owners asked me when I was available to work during the week. I told her, the three of them shared a look amongst one another, and they all said, “Cool, okay. This is how your commission will work.” Since then, I have been very happy in my new role. I am working with a great team of people as well as helping new people with similar interests and goals join a gym and do the things they are passionate about. I help children gain confidence, help men get back into shape, and encourage women to learn to kick some butt. My own training has skyrocketed, and though I am at the gym five days a week, it never feels like “I’m going to work.” My organization and self-motivation have been critical in helping me track sales and sell memberships. My enjoyment of public speaking has allowed me to feel comfortable on the phone and in person when dealing with clients of all ages. My chosen jobs for my SASAH credit have led me right to this point, where I now feel “like a grown-up” and am treated as such. My position at Platinum Martial Arts has certainly made me reconsider my future which, although a little overwhelming, is ultimately thrilling as it truly is limitless.

My new position was in the forefront of my mind when organizing my final presentation. Again, discussing the entirety of my internship with the dean’s office was near impossible in under four minutes, but my goal was to provide a general overview of the responsibilities I was given and the critical skills it has helped me develop. Listening to others present about their projects was exciting and helped me to reconsider my own through different perspectives. I loved seeing the mix of internship, CELs, and personal research projects that my classmates took on. I could see how passionate Ronnie felt about her work with the school kids; I could see how

proud Sarah Charette was about putting on an entire exhibition; and I could see devoted Sarah Collins had become to the YMCA, among others. Though it was a tad too late to make any real changes to my own presentation, I used their enthusiasm to help me procure my own. Of course, I was nervous, but everyone was so genuinely excited to share what they had poured so much hard work into, and I wanted people to know that I was excited, too. I was proud of everything I had accomplished, and I wanted my slides to reflect that. While the bad is never covered quite as thoroughly as the good (I had put in the photo of my bruised temple after I ran into a sign on a Brightspark tour, but was unable to elaborate further), I think that's also because there is fundamentally less bad than good that took place during these projects. I feel as though my experiences complemented one another nicely, beginning with the more fun-looking CEL and finishing off with the more professional-appearing internship. Of course, Brightspark was not solely about fun, and the dean's office was not solely about professionalization. I have been able to analyze each and see where they have come to overlap over the last 6-12 months. They both held components of each, ultimately making for one grand learning experience and what was probably the best "credit" I got to earn here at Western!