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Winter 2021

## Learning from Experience: Designing for Western Libraries and Western Mustangs

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13 April 2021

### Learning from Experience:

#### Designing for Western Libraries and Western Mustangs

My Experiential Learning credits were completed quite close to home, at Western Libraries and with the Western Mustangs. Both positions were related to graphic design, but I completed an incredible variety of work. More than the work I produced, these internships exposed me to wonderful groups of people and gave me a variety of hard and soft skills that have been invaluable in both my professional and personal life. I have also learned a lot about the kind of work I enjoy and the kind of people I would want to work with in the future. Through the trials and triumphs of each internship, I was able to grow as a person and a designer, and I emerged from each with a strength and confidence that I can apply in all areas of my life.

My first internship credit took place over one summer with Western Libraries. I worked in a small, windowless office in Weldon Library with two other women: Rayanne, a fellow graphic designer, and Julie, my supervisor. The title of the position was “Social Media Intern,” but the duties for the role were deceptively diverse. I was tasked with creating social-media content for the Western Libraries Facebook and Twitter accounts. This consisted of graphics, illustrations, videos, animations, as well as photographs of the library and patrons. In addition to creating posts for social media, I was also able to explore the wider responsibilities of social-media management. I gained significant experience in copywriting, which is the creation of captions for social media. I also learned about monitoring metrics, such as likes, shares, and engagements, to see which posts performed the best with different user audiences, as well as

monitor for questions, comments, and complaints, to ensure patrons were being helped in a timely manner. Throughout the summer, I also assisted with the launch of the Western Libraries Instagram account, creating post schedules and ensuring it could integrate smoothly with the existing accounts. Two years later, the account has nearly 1500 followers. I found this social-media-management experience particularly valuable, as I had identified it as a gap in my knowledge from questions asked in previous job interviews. In addition to work for social media, I created posters and handouts for various other library initiatives, such as course-readings services for professors. I was also involved in lengthier initiatives, such as creating a “welcome back” sign on the Weldon windows made of Post-it notes and designing a tote bag for sale at the library front desks. The great variety in my work made the internship both exciting and dynamic, and the creative freedom given to me made me feel that my work was greatly valued.

The most exciting opportunity I was given that summer was the chance to create the design for new Western Libraries tote bags. I have always enjoyed product design, particularly for shirts and bags, because of how rewarding it is to see people wearing clothing with your design or carrying your design around on an object they use every day. Graphic design is often left within the digital world, so it is exciting to design something with a tangible outcome. However, the project also challenged me to take a greater leadership role in the development and execution of a project. Julie charged me with organizing, preparing, and running meetings about the project’s development with various staff from across the libraries. At first I was very nervous, as I felt that my role as a mere intern did not give me the authority to lead meetings. This was a feeling leftover from my previous job at RBC, where I worked with a wonderful and attentive group of people but, as an intern, was considered fairly insignificant in the larger organization. However, instead of letting my nerves get the best of me, I channeled that energy

into over-preparing for the first meeting. My dedication paid off, and the meeting went very smoothly, with a lovely group of people who were respectful of my graphic-design experience. The rest of the project went equally well, and the finished tote is one of my favourite design projects I have ever worked on. This project also helped me realize that my experience is valuable, regardless of how peripheral I feel to a group of people.

The variety of assignments, though exciting, meant that I had to work outside of my creative comfort zone. Going into this position I was very familiar with several programs under the Adobe Creative Cloud suite, the leading set of programs for all types of design. I was most familiar with Photoshop, a general art-and-imaging-editing software, and Illustrator, a program meant specifically for graphic design. These programs, however, would not be suitable for every project required for Western Libraries. Over the course of the summer, I needed to familiarize myself with Premiere Pro, Adobe's video-editing software; After Effects, for motion design and animation; as well as Lightroom, for detailed photo editing. Additionally, given the combination of digital and print materials I was required to make, I needed to become more confident designing for different formats, ensuring that details such as the colour difference between print and screen would not negatively impact the design. The volume of new learning required was certainly intimidating, but it led to a more interesting and enriching internship experience than if I had been working only on familiar projects.

For the new Adobe software, I became much more comfortable with self-guided learning and taking advantage of online resources. Confident in my ability to thrive under pressure, I was able to create a project in After Effects in only one day, with no prior knowledge of the program. For video projects, Rayanne served as a wonderful mentor, ensuring that I had enough support to storyboard, film, direct, and edit several video projects on my own. Though the variety of work

required had the potential to overwhelm me with unfamiliarity, the confidence I had in my own ability coupled with the support and mentorship of Julie and Rayanne meant that I was always confident the project would be a fun experience and turn out well.

A final challenge that I faced was the collaborative nature of almost every project, a contrast to the solitary design work I was accustomed to. One of Western Libraries' most popular campaigns was "bookface Fridays," a photo each Friday of a library patron holding up a book cover with a face on it. This presented a particular challenge not only because I needed to approach strangers in the library (something already intimidating but made even worse by the fact I was carrying a large box of book covers, which no doubt added to my eccentric appearance) but also because of how precise the photography needed to be. To achieve the illusion of the book cover melding with the person holding it, I needed to work very closely with the stranger, always taking multiple shots and sometimes requiring them to follow various minute instructions to readjust their position. Though this was originally intimidating, by the end of the summer, it was one of my favourite campaigns to work on.

For this project, I needed to work closely with, in addition to strangers, various other Western Libraries staff as well as student Casual Assistants (CAs). The greatest challenges I faced here were overcoming the shyness of some CAs and balancing the input of others with my own design experience. Occasionally, I ran into an issue where someone without graphic-design experience would ask me for a very specific design. In most cases, I would have ideas about how to improve the design, but I needed to approach the situation tactfully to ensure the person I was collaborating with felt respected. I did not want to sacrifice the quality of the post, but I also did not want to cut off the project from its collaborative spirit. Often, I would end up creating two designs, the one requested and the one I had improved, and explaining the differences and why I

thought one would perform better online. A compromise was often reached, where I was happy with the quality of the design and the collaborator felt represented in the final product. This, to me, was one of the most rewarding parts of the internship: being able to build trust and form strong working relationships with people who had little experience with creative projects. In addition, overseeing others forced me to become more confident in leadership, something that I struggle with as I am naturally introverted. I had to be confident in my own abilities to rally confidence and enthusiasm from the others I was working with.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of my time with Western Libraries was the attitude everyone had about the purpose of our work. Rather than searching for the greatest profits or the most shares, Julie described our work as simply “meant to delight.” We tried to be upbeat and amusing, posting content that would brighten a viewer’s day. This made the work more engaging for me, as I felt like I was having a significant impact on the Western student experience and making viewers happy. This helped me recognize that I am more satisfied in a role that is focused on bringing joy rather than making money, an observation that has since guided the organizations I apply to for work.

My second internship credit was with the Western Mustangs. I worked in the office for three years, working in a slightly different capacity each time. I would have returned for a fourth year, but the pandemic forced the office to downsize. The Mustangs communications team worked in a small office in the campus Recreation Center, with a window facing the pool and a door facing the squash courts. We had one direct supervisor and three student teams: the designers, the writers, and the photographers. Each team would work independently, and once each individual aspect was done, it would be passed on and eventually put together for social media. It was a small but very collaborative team made up of some of my now-favourite people,

and it was a working experience that was immeasurably valuable to my personal and professional future.

In my first year with the Mustangs, I worked exclusively with the graphic-design team. I made graphics for weekly social-media posts, primarily promoting upcoming games. With dozens of sports teams, we were kept quite busy. The majority of work I completed was the same every week, working from templates that ensured the team would be able to keep up with the volume of posts required every day. I also filled out programmes each week for our top-tier sports (football, basketball, volleyball, and hockey) that would be distributed to those attending the game. While this could be monotonous at times, I was also assigned several more exciting projects. For example, I was able to design the annual Mustangs Christmas card sent out to alumni and donors. In second year, my supervisor changed unexpectedly. This complicated the office's set working schedule a bit as my new supervisor, Ryan, was becoming accustomed to the position. Ryan was unfamiliar with how the teams worked, so I was required to take on a leadership position within in the graphics team. The start of the year was rocky, but every team member was intent on making sure Ryan settled into the position well, and within a few months, we had become a tight-knit family again. That year, I continued to make weekly social-media graphics and game programmes, but I was also given greater creative freedom, making new templates for weekly use to refresh designs that we had been using for years.

At the end of my second year, the two most experienced students in the office (David, a talented and funny writer, and Carla, a graphic designer and my student mentor) graduated. It was a sad farewell, but it led to my promotion to one of the three paid positions with the Mustangs. As a result, my third year was spent in a largely supervisory role. Instead of working directly with any of the three student teams, I was in charge of running the social-media

schedule. This required the use of Buffer, a social-media scheduling tool, used to set up posts across social-media platforms in advance. I was almost completely in charge of the Mustangs Buffer for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This meant that I had to set up each post for the week in the virtual schedule, as well as obtain and proofread both graphics and copy (captions) from the designers and writers. I needed to ensure everything, including scheduling information, spelling of athletes' names, etc., was correct for the dozens of posts that were put up every week. Though working with Buffer could be tedious, I am very skilled with detail-oriented work and thus quickly became accustomed to the work. This process also taught me that patience and confidence are the key to guiding people, something I have used in the past year for my leadership role on student council. Though my three years with the Mustangs varied in their duties, I always felt that my work was growing and that I was contributing positively to a small and tight-knit team.

The first challenge I faced was that I was not at all familiar with sports and sports design. When I applied for the position with the Mustangs, I was aware that I lacked the knowledge about sports and athletics that might ease my transition into the position. I was, however, determined to continue graphic design as an extracurricular in university, having dedicated a lot of time to it in high school. The position of volunteer graphic designer with the Mustangs was the only opportunity I could find over the summer, so I applied eagerly, despite it lying outside of my area of expertise. Yet, by the time I had finished my first year I had attended every at-home football game and knew many of our top players across all sports by type. The adjustment to designing for sports (more exciting and dynamic than I was used to) took some time, but the adjustment to the culture of Mustangs athletics was easy to slip into. I am grateful that I received a question about this during my presentation during SASAH's Learning from Experience event,



as I was able to reflect on how my perception of sports had changed. I am still not a sporty person. I would not watch a football or hockey game on TV. I would, however, always attend a Mustangs game. Thus, in my years with the Mustangs, my perception of sports has not necessarily changed, but I came to realize that I enjoy being part of a small and connected community. Becoming involved in the Mustangs athletic communities gave me the level of connection that I craved, and my work was more enjoyable knowing that the people I was representing were kind and part of my community.

Another challenge I faced was a lack of technical skills in certain software. The first issue was that the Mustangs office only had Mac computers, which I had never used before. This meant that my first weeks were spent struggling with adjusting to the position alongside adjusting to the minute differences between Mac and PC computers. I needed to relearn everything from keyboard shortcuts to searching for files. I was initially embarrassed to ask for help with such small issues, but everyone in the office was supportive and I learned quickly. Overcoming my hesitation to ask for help early, particularly regarding such small and inconsequential issues, sped up my integration with the communications team, allowing me to quickly feel at home. In addition to struggling with the office Macs, I also needed to teach myself InDesign, Adobe's publication-layout software, which boasts a notoriously steep learning curve. I fortunately started off editing game programmes that were already in a template, so I could accustom myself to changing content before I had to learn how to structure the pages themselves. It was also helpful to my morale that no one else in the office was completely confident with InDesign, meaning that I was not alone in my confusion or frustration. After weeks of practice (and many online tutorials), I was confident in my new abilities. Learning InDesign early in my design career has been very beneficial, and my expertise has been useful in

my other internships and personal projects and for the AHSC publication *Spotlight* for which I've done the layout design for the past two years. This is a skill that has been complimented at other jobs and has allowed me to approach a position confidently even while lacking useful hard skills. Without the Mustangs internship providing a safe learning space, I would have struggled longer in future positions and possibly lost out on some of the project opportunities that I am so proud of today.

Perhaps the most valuable takeaway from my time with the Mustangs was confidence in my own design decisions. This was my first time working in design professionally rather than academically or simply for fun, and I was facing a great degree of impostor syndrome. I was convinced that my work, though it may have been enough for graphic-design class in high school, would not be suitable for “real” design that an audience would see. I recall clearly my first year with the Mustangs, when I would ask my then-supervisor Tony to look over every design I made, even if all I had done was insert a photo and some text into a set template. This only went on for a few weeks before he replied, “You don’t need to ask me if it’s good. If you think it’s good, that’s all I need to know.” This was a bit of a shock to me, as I had not been prepared for such confidence to be placed in my abilities, which were, in my opinion, underdeveloped. Over the next few years with the Mustangs, I realized that confidence in myself was an incredible asset, for improving not only the quality of my work but the efficiency, too. Nothing slows down a project quite like needing a supervisor to check over everything, something that simply is not always feasible in a fast-paced environment. Learning to trust my own judgement has thus made me a better worker, in design and across other disciplines.

My three years with the Mustangs were immensely rewarding. These three years of work have allowed me to develop a diverse set of graphic-design and social-media-management skills

and have helped me become a more confident leader. The first year built up my confidence, and the subsequent two, my leadership skills, which I have used to adapt to unfamiliar tasks—such as compliance analysis at RBC—and effectively manage groups of people—such as the twelve-person communications portfolio on Student Council. I think my work with Buffer, through which I managed designers and writers without directly interacting with them all at the same time, has equipped me particularly well for people management in our current virtual climate. Though this position has helped me develop my technical skills, I have also further expanded my soft skills to make me even more confident and capable. In particular, I was able to strengthen my leadership experience, not only to direct work with other designers in my field of expertise but also to guide writers and photographers in a collaborative process. This internship showed me that my soft skills are more than enough to cover up a temporary lack in hard skills, and that there are few—if any! —programs that I cannot learn myself. I am also grateful that I had this experience to show me what makes work valuable and how the work I produce is made more meaningful when I enjoy the people I am working alongside.

Being a SASAH student meant I was uniquely well-equipped to work in both of my internship positions. The clearest benefit of SASAH was its interdisciplinary nature. Over the years, SASAH taught me how differences in knowledge backgrounds is an asset and that diversity in a team helps provide fresh perspectives that makes an overall improvement to the final product. In light of my Mustangs internship, SASAH helped me to reflect upon and appreciate the value of working outside my existing knowledge. I could have easily overlooked the position because sports design lay outside my area of expertise, but an interdisciplinary spirit encourages exploration outside one's comfort zone. Though the internship may have taken more adjustment because of its unfamiliar subject matter, it was more personally and professionally

rewarding as a result. The diversity of SASAH courses has also taught me that I have a useful set of soft skills that carries between subjects, allowing me to succeed even in unfamiliar circumstances. Every SASAH course emphasized creativity, confidence, and effective communication, skills that have been useful in every position I have held. In addition, SASAH's method of course delivery, in which every semester is a new topic, means that I am well used to the idea of throwing myself fully into unfamiliar territory with confidence, knowing that, even if I don't succeed, I will have learned something valuable.

SASAH's practice of encouraging individual interpretations of criteria has given me a lot of confidence in the value of my own ideas, and several times I was able to steer a project towards a stronger final product by asserting my own ideas. For example, our "Date with a Book" film for Book Lovers' Day with Western Libraries was originally pitched in a social-media brainstorming meeting as being a montage of different people with different books. I felt that the story would be stronger if it were about only one person, and so I approached Julie with a storyboard of my idea, explaining why I felt that the continuity would help communicate the message in a stronger way. She agreed, and the video ended up being one of our most successful projects of the summer, getting very high engagement rates on Twitter and Facebook. Without SASAH's opportunities to explore my own original and creative ideas across different media, I might not have had the initiative to present my own interpretation of the project, and it would have likely suffered as a result.

Overall, SASAH provides a unique experience for its students that helps build an array of soft skills that can be invaluable in any position. In particular, it develops students' initiative, creativity, and communication, all while fostering an interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit.

SASAH helped me greatly in both of my internship positions, and I have no doubt it will continue to help me well into the future.

Creating the presentation for my internship placements was a valuable experience. In particular, it encouraged me to reflect deeply on my work, on how I grew not only professionally but also personally. Perhaps the greatest challenge for me was synthesizing my internships down to the 3.5 minutes necessary to fit the time constraints of the presentation. To achieve this, I condensed each internship into three parts: job requirements and goals, challenges, and outcomes. I felt that these categories, though fairly reductionist and certainly not capable of giving viewers a full understanding of the depth of my experiences, provided an effective overview of what I contributed to and got out of each position. I felt that my presentation was very straightforward, so much so that I did not have a script. I was simply confident that I knew what needed to be said for each slide. Additionally, I tried to include samples of my work because I am proud of what I produced in each position, though I wish there had been more time for me to explain each piece. My enjoyment of each position meant that the final presentation came together easily, and I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the wealth of my experiences.

After my presentation, I received several interesting questions. One was about how SASAH helped with my internships, which I covered in the section above. Another question concerned how my perspective on sports had changed from working with the Mustangs, which I covered in my review of that internship. The final question I received, and the one that gave me the most to think about, was how I have changed as a designer. When I left high school, I was convinced that I wanted to be a graphic designer. I now know that I am interested in more from a position than just creating graphics. Thus, though I answered the question at the time saying I

had learned about the value of collaboration in art, I would now say that what has really changed is my definition of what a designer is. Design is more than a set of practical skills: it is a mindset and a spirit that one brings to every project. I approach all my work creatively and with an eye for detail that I credit to my experience in graphic design. I know now that working in design does not necessarily entail creating graphics, which opens up my future career to countless possibilities that I had closed off when leaving high school. I am excited to see what other opportunities the future holds.

To conclude, both of my internships were wonderful experiences, in which I created some great work with some even better people. Each position allowed me to work on myself in both a personal and professional context, and I gained both hard and soft skills that will help me in the future. I am privileged to have had these opportunities, both of which have given me an incredible experience and valuable connections. I highly recommend all students to undertake an internship experience, even if the position is unfamiliar. The value of experiential learning is immeasurable, and you might even learn something new about yourself along the way.

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Below, you can find a selection of the work I completed over my internships.









**Western Libraries** @westernulibs · Jun 28

🇨🇦 Wishing you a Happy Canada Day weekend 🇨🇦! It's the perfect chance to enjoy poutine or Timmies while reflecting on the Stanley Cup Finals. Our libraries will be closed on Monday, and we're real sorry about that, #WesternU 🙏! #canadianclichés #CanadaDay



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