

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

My internship sent me to Montezuma County in Southwestern Colorado to become involved with ever changing rural community and development initiatives. Working directly with stakeholders such as the local Chamber of Commerce in Cortez, the County-Wide Extension Office, and higher educational institutions, we explored many ways on how we can collaborate and use existing institutions to build stronger and more diverse communities in the southwest corner of the state. In Montezuma County, I took a deep dive into community and economic development and how stakeholders: whether public, private, educational, and/or not-for-profit come together to engage the community and keep residents in the region. I also had a chance to explore how public policy can advance social equity, all relevant in my university studies.

This internship led me to become directly involved in numerous projects to provide affordable and relevant degree and certificate programs for students in the region. These programs aim to allow students to receive certificates, associates, or bachelor's degrees from CSU or Pueblo Community College without having to leave the region. Furthermore, much of my internship involved me working in the Cortez Chamber of Commerce and let me speak and engage with even more members of the community.

INTERNSHIP GOALS

The goals we created for this internship revolved around building professional development skills to help me communicate with stakeholders and other important members of the community. Acquiring skills that can only be refined in real-world environments, this internship had me get out of my comfort zone on numerous occasions, getting opportunities to speak and engage with new people nearly every day. These conversations required me to ask critical questions and listen to an array of important people. Getting this opportunity to practice, I hoped going into this internship that I would grow more confident speaking to new people and being more concise in my language.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR EDUCATION

As a graduate student studying Policy and Public Administration, this internship greatly applies to my education. For much of the internship I was involved in the creation of new policies aimed towards community engagement and economic development. These policies are like policies passed by local governments and incorporate a multidisciplinary approach to policy making. Being involved with these projects were incredibly beneficial for me, granting me experience I will need beyond my time in graduate school.

Furthermore, this internship has inspired me to explore new areas of content in my classes. Currently, I am involved in a project regarding the wicked problems around the allocation of water in the Colorado river. Having learned many interesting perspectives regarding water in the southwest, I plan to study these further in my graduate courses.

WHAT YOU DID

As I began my internship in Southwestern Colorado, we spent much time exploring the region and the locations for many stakeholders. We drove in the Ute Mountain Ute lands, one of only two sovereign indigenous nations in Colorado. We visited the Southwestern Research Center near the town of Yellow Jacket, as well as the main western research campus in Orchard Mesa. We did site visits, and I attended master gardener meetings and irrigation workshops, to help myself get an idea of the types of work the Montezuma County Extension office does. After getting settled in, I spent most days at the Pueblo Community College Southwestern campus, and volunteering at the Cortez Chamber of Commerce.

At these locations, I spent a lot of time working on two major projects for CSU and PCC. The first of these projects is setting up a collaborative campus in the current PCC Southwest campus in Mancos. This collaborative campus model will allow students to complete courses and obtain degrees from either or both CSU and PCC without having to leave the region. Much of my work for this project involved connecting needs-based assessments, sitting in meetings helping draft a memorandum of understanding for the project, and connecting and informing local stakeholders of the project. Additionally, I was tasked with assisting the Academic Program Director of PCC Southwest to help him set up an indigenous adult learner program. This program will help indigenous adults obtain certificates needed in construction and information technology sectors. Much of my work so far for this project has been mostly data entry. Days at the Cortez Chamber of Commerce also involved me working on general upkeep, updating their website, helping fix technological problems, cleaning, and other similar tasks.

This internship also gave me a lot of opportunities outside the office that I found to be very valuable in helping me better understand the region. I spent numerous days exploring Mesa Verde National Park, McElmo Canyon, Canyons of the Ancients, and other archeological and nature sites. These experiences were valuable in helping me understand the profound living history of the region, and the importance to further connect community and higher-level educational institutions to indigenous peoples. These days taught me a great appreciation for this region and the people that have lived in it for a very long time.

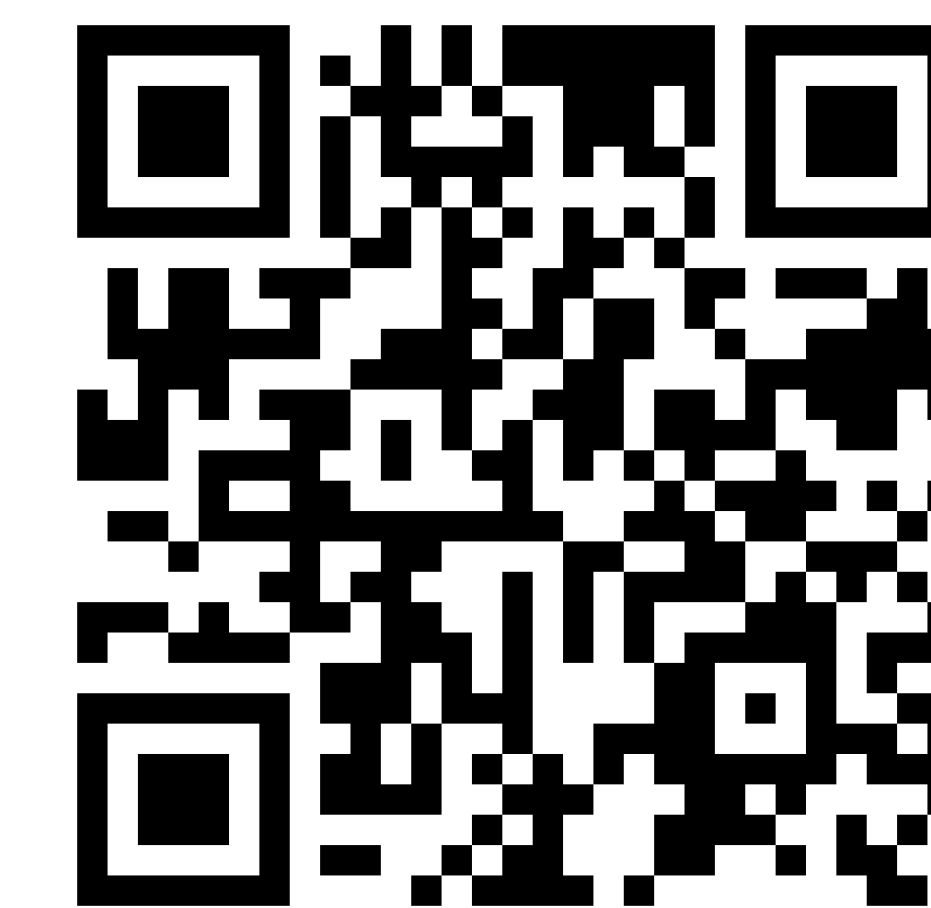
Figure 1. (Image) On location at the Cortez Chamber of Commerce



WHAT YOU LEARNED

Along with giving me an opportunity to work and refine professional development skills, this internship taught me the importance of how public policy can greatly strengthen local communities if they are made with inclusivity and community needs in mind. Thinking of ways to diversify industries in our region, connecting them to resources we can provide, and helping serve the under-served families in our community has been very enriching and insightful. In building stronger communities, it is not just important to increase access to higher education like we are already doing, but to also keep talented individuals home. This is one of the reasons why working at the Cortez Chamber of Commerce was an important aspect to my internship. Getting to sit in on meetings, and working at the front desk, I was able to learn about higher educational needs of local businesses in the Southwest and how Cortez is currently attempting to keep individuals in the region. All these experiences were important for me in my professional development and gets me further motivated to work for small to medium sized communities after I graduate with my Master's.

Figure 2. (QR Code) Current Draft of CSU-PCC MOU



NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, I will still be involved with these institutions in creating a better region in Southwestern Colorado. I will be personally volunteering with PCC Southwest with their projects to make more accessible education for indigenous people in the region. I will also continue to help CSU academic administrators, as well as Montezuma County Extension and PCC Southwest, to create new programs for the collaborative campus. I believe that ultimately, my work in the Southwest has only just begun, and I am excited to continue my work remotely and learn more about sustainable economic development initiatives.