

**ENS Capri Woolridge
Jr. COSTEP Summer 2014
Baylor University
Western Arizona District Office
Tempe, Arizona**

The Indian Health Service (IHS) provided me with the best internship experience I have had throughout my college career. Going into this summer, I was excited and anxious to find out who I would be working with, what I would be doing, and what my experiences on the reservations would be like. I was fortunate enough to be placed in an area where I would be close to family, so I decided to visit the office before my internship started. I was extremely nervous to step out of my college bubble at Baylor University and into the real world. My preceptor, LT Mistin Ray, Environmental Health Officer (Phoenix Service Unit) immediately made me feel comfortable and I was ready to start working right away.



Me standing in front of the Lodge in Supai, AZ.

Throughout my journey as a COSTEP, I was able to participate in various surveys, trainings, and inspections. I was not simply my preceptor's shadow, but I was allowed to actively participate and actually take the lead in certain areas. I was inspired by the amount of trust the agency had in me and this motivated me to do my best with every task given to me. Being expected to work side by side along with other Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) taught me a level of professionalism that I had never experienced before and also forced me to come out of my shell.

My preceptor made a day by day work plan that would keep me busy for the entire summer. When I first laid eyes on my jam packed work plan, I knew that this was going to be a great learning experience. Within my first full week on the job I was able to conduct multiple safety assessments of homes occupied by community elders and participate in pre-opening inspections for a jail and deli. I was able to gain more field experience in one week with IHS than I had gained in an entire semester with previous internships.

I did not realize the various hats an EHO must wear in order to get jobs done until I noticed that everyday on my work plan was different. Different areas included: vector control, food safety, communicable diseases, injury prevention, rabies vaccinations, and much more. My education at Baylor University thus far definitely gave me a foundation that allowed me to keep up with my preceptor and understand everything that was going on around me, but going out into the field and getting hands-on experience is something that you cannot prepare for in the classroom. Not only did I learn how to write technical reports, conduct food, hotel, and pool surveys, and set mosquito traps, I also learned how to effectively communicate with tribal community members and staff and explain complex situations in a way that could be understood. I learned about the unique cultures of different tribes that I visited as well. Though EHOs so have to pull out their regulatory hats when warranted, I realized that the nature of this job is more about service and education than enforcement and regulation.

The most memorable experience was my trip to the Havasupai Reservation located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The tribe has no cars, no real roads, and have to fly or utilize mules to bring in their goods. Being able to experience their hardships first hand and learn about this isolated tribe's culture was the best part of the trip. I also had the privilege of working with the housing department on conducting home mold assessments. The home assessments coincided with my summer project which was to create home mold safety guides for the residents of the Havasupai Tribe. Being able to stay in Supai for several days and meet with different people equipped me with insight on what was contributing to the mold issue. With guidance from the Western Arizona District Office and the housing department in Supai, I was able to create a mold prevention guide, mold clean up guide, and an educational powerpoint that could be presented to the community.

This trip is what made me realize that I did choose the right major. It reaffirmed my passion for helping others and my determination to effect change where possible. This trip also taught me the importance of understanding each tribe's culture and what the community values. Understanding the people helps you know how to improve their way of living while incorporating what is important to them.



CDR Vincent Slayton-Garcia and I setting mosquito traps in Parker, AZ.

My time at the Western Arizona District Office (WADO) was the perfect balance of having fun and being challenged professionally. Although EHOs do have set work hours, typical days can extend beyond normal duty hours depending on services being provided, emergencies, and other field priorities. Some of my days started at 6:30 in the morning and others ended at 9:00 at night. The long workdays were very difficult for me to get used to, but once I did, I realized how much we were getting done in a day and it made me feel really accomplished. I never noticed how long we worked until I was heading home because the days were that much fun. I never experienced a dull moment in the field. This summer I gained invaluable experience that cannot be taught in a classroom. Through watching the EHOs and Engineers at WADO, I learned the importance of staying positive no matter what the circumstances are and making the best of every situation.

Every internship that a person participates in will provide them with a chance to build their resume, but it is very rare that an undergraduate student is given the opportunity to have an internship experience that helps you grow as an individual. My Jr. COSTEP experience has given me a taste of what having a career with US Public Health Service, and specifically, IHS could be like. Not only did this experience give me hands-on training in the field of environmental health, it also opened my eyes to what I am passionate about. Being able to build relationships with the tribes and see first hand the adversities that they face has shown me that I am passionate about effecting change in the lives of under served people; whether that be Native Americans, minorities, or communities in developing countries. This program has been a life changing experience that will help me in multiple facets of life. You do not have to know for sure if you want to be an Environmental Health Officer for IHS, but if you are looking for a life changing experience that will help you grow as a professional, open your eyes to sides of yourself that you have not seen before, and happen to have an interest in environmental health, I highly recommend putting serious thought into applying for the Jr. COSTEP program.