Coming into college, I was full of both confidence, but uncertainty. In grade school, I has always excelled in academics and I was thus confident that I could also succeed academically in college. On the other hand, although I had a few ideas floating in my mind, I did not have any clear direction of where I wanted to take my career, and thus, what I wanted to study.

For most my life, I felt like I should study a hard science field. STEM subjects were frequently lauded over the humanities and advertised as meaningful, profitable fields. Furthermore, I had always found these subjects interesting and did well in STEM classes. On the other hand, I was also considering working in the environmental field. In the summer before my senior year of high school, I was given the opportunity to study abroad in Beijing during the summer on scholarship. Experiencing the cultural and infrastructural differences in litter culture, waste management, and recycling between Beijing and the green Seattle bubble helped me realize how much I cared about the environment and wanted to educate others on the importance of caring for the environment.

As a form of self-compromise, I decided to try a few environmental science courses and keep Biology in the back of my mind. As a result, during my first quarter at the UW I signed up for a marine biology course and a chemistry course. While I found these courses interesting enough, I finished autumn quarter feeling uninspired. On a whim, I enrolled in an introductory environmental studies course, ENVIR100, the following quarter while continuing to take chemistry as a prerequisite for Biology.

Before taking ENVIR100, I had only ever considered studying environmental science and not environmental studies, as I had always taken and preferred science courses over humanities courses while in high school. To my surprise, I was blown away. My professors were passionate and learning about concepts and ideas of sustainability, the idea that to sustain good quality of life for all required more than just an environmental approach, hooked me. After taking the course, I applied to the environmental studies major.

Running on a wave of passion about the environment, I applied to join the UW Recyclemania student team, where I promoted recycling and positive waste diversion habits at the UW. Other extracurricular activities I participated in included joining the UW Earth Club and the UW Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as continuing to volunteer for a youth leadership non-profit I had volunteered with in high school. Reflecting back, I think I joined Earth Club and the Orchestra in part out of habit, as I had been very active in extracurricular activities during high school, as well as out of a desire to find a community at the UW. With a shyness towards strangers, preference to study alone, and a revolving door of classmates each quarter, I struggled to make lasting friendships at college. Through participation in extracurricular activities, I hoped that I could instead find friends through these groups.

At the start of my sophomore year I continued to try and find my footing at the UW. I continued playing with the UW Philharmonic Orchestra, got more involved in Earth Club by applying to become the Earth Club Treasurer, and took courses that fulfilled the Environmental Studies degree. Yet although I really enjoyed my environmental studies courses, and I was forming friendships and small communities in Earth Club, at my part time jobs, and in my Chinese classes, I still felt like something was missing. I still felt like I had not found my community at the UW. I felt like I was simply taking courses and attending meetings, but not building many genuine connections or doing really meaningful work.

Reflecting on this, I remembered something my favorite high school teacher had told me before I graduated. She mentioned a friend of hers was an advisor of a program called Community, Environment, and Planning (CEP) at UW. My teacher had recommended I check it out and until then, I hadn’t given it a second thought. However, feeling open to trying new options, I decided to give its introductory course, CEP200, a try that winter.

Coming into CEP200, I expected to be most interested in the environmental portion of the major. However, what ended up being the most inspiring and interesting part of the course was learning about the meaning of and power of community. During one class session, a guest speaker described a project he led where he worked with a community to build a public art play structure for children. The project brought the community together and helped reduce the amount of gang activity in the park. His story really stuck with me. This was work which sounded not only fun, but meaningful, where you could see the real difference one could make in communities. With visions of combining community development, sustainability, and the environment in mind, I applied to CEP that quarter and was accepted in the spring.

Before officially starting the CEP major, I got a taste on work which intersected community development and environmental issues the preceding summer. A friend connected me with an internship with El Centro de la Raza in the Seattle Beacon Hill Neighborhood where I helped compile data from surveys and community meetings about the community’s opinions on and knowledge of the air and noise. The meetings were intended to not only inform community members about the environmental injustice they experienced, but solicit opinions on what actions and solutions to pursue in response. Through my internship, I experienced firsthand the importance of reaching out to and supporting local communities, and the power of community building and community organizing.

When I resumed school in the fall, I once again struggled to get situated. Since almost all the previous UW Earth Club members had graduated the previous year, I took up the role of Earth Club president. I had to recruit new members, plan events, and create a new officer team by myself. Although it was very stressful, I learned a lot that year about organizing meetings and events, which later helped me plan things more smoothly in my senior year for my senior project. Similarly, in winter quarter I joined the student leadership team planning the 2018 UW Earth Day event. This project was a much larger commitment than I anticipated, involving weekly meetings throughout winter and early spring. However, it was ultimately a very rewarding experience and I gained a lot of skills in event planning and volunteering coordination.

The balancing act continued through the spring when I took on a new part time job developing coding curriculum for elementary school students and leading Empowered Eco-Education, a UW Inner Pipeline Seminar Course teaching elementary school students about natural science and the environment. At the same time, I also decided to challenge myself by taking a computer science course, CS142.

In CEP, for our Social Structures and Process class, CEP303, I spent the quarter studying the Seattle International District and learning more about how planning affects communities and everyday individuals. I had a personal connection and many fond memories of the International District before taking this course, so studying the area from a planning and student perspective was both fun and enlightening. Through this course I really started to understand issues of planning and development and how they affected individuals, businesses, and communities. Although I still had no intention in entering the urban planning field, I then understood the importance and implications of planning and how it connects to many other fields and careers.

With my combined experience in environmental education and working with local communities and diverse populations, I applied to a National Park Service urban climate change education programming internship in Los Angeles. To my surprise, I was awarded the internship and spent the entire summer teaching urban youth about natural science, working with local museums on climate change programming, and facilitating community dialogues on how environmental issues and sustainability related to their communities and their communities’ concerns. The entire internship process was very empowering for me as I learned later that the internship had been very competitive and I had competed against graduate students for the position. Furthermore, unlike my previous internship, I had no previous connection to hiring manager or application interviewer, so I felt like I had earned the position entirely through my own merit and experience.

The internship itself was an amazing experience. Coming into the internship, I already had a foundational understanding of urban issues and how to work with urban communities of color, but having the opportunity to not only work but also live in Los Angeles really was an eye-opening experience. Compared to Seattle, Los Angeles has a very different culture and is much more culturally diverse. While there, I worked with communities that I had very limited exposure to before and doing so helped me better understand the issues and concerns their communities faced. Working with these communities reinforced my awareness of my own privilege and what communities, governments, and individuals can do to support marginalized and under-privileged individuals.

Entering my last year at UW, I felt like I was finally part of a community. During the CEP Fall Retreat I felt like I truly belonged in the major. I joined the CEP Community Equity Committee (CEC) and helped propose the implementation of a Preferred Gender Pronoun Policy and Native Land Recognition Policy for the CEP major. I facilitated the discussion and voting session for these policies and was surprised that not everyone supported the proposed policies. I realized I had wrongly assumed everyone in the major thought the policies were the best way to achieve the visions I had for these policies, and that these policies were in the best interest for our major and our community. This realization, along with the experience of having to facilitate relatively charged and emotional discussion on these topics, helped me become not only a better facilitator, but also more open-minded. My initial reaction to the rejection of these policies was shock and disappointment, but after hearing the thoughts of those who opposed the policies, I came to understand their reasoning and that they also wanted what was best for our community and were voting according to what they thought was best. Although these policies did not pass, I continued working with CEC to solicit feedback and hopefully these policies will pass next year. Furthermore, in fall quarter I also began work on my senior project. I decided I wanted to research how to pass an undergraduate sustainability graduation requirement at the UW and planned on interviewing UW staff, students, and faculty for feedback.

In terms of academics for fall quarter, I really struggled in CEP460, Planning in Context. This was a studio course where students worked in teams to complete a planning project for a city. My team worked on developing a series of recommendations for the implementation of a buildings energy benchmarking program for the City of Bellevue. This course was very challenging and stressful due to a discrepancy in the project expectations between our team and our project supervisor from the City, as well as some intra-group conflict and communication issues. Despite these difficulties however, we were able to finish the project and it was overall a valuable experience in learning how to work with clients and in a team with different work styles, visions, and topic expertise.

I also took an environmental pedagogy course in the fall which renewed my interest in education and teaching. Despite my focus on the environment, I had always found the field of education rewarding, and had a variety of tutoring, teaching, and curriculum development positions over the years, and this course inspired me to seriously consider education as a potential career field. As a result, I applied for Teach for America and City Year, two non-profit programs where I would spend the next two years teaching or leading mentor and tutoring programs for students at at-risk schools.

In winter quarter, I decided to drop my Environmental Studies major in favor of a minor, as I finally admitted that it would be too difficult to finish both with both majors requiring separate internships and I would have to do a Senior Project and Senior Capstone at the same time. I also made the very painful decision that quarter to dissolve Earth Club due to extremely poor turnout and a lack of interest from myself and the other officers. By winter quarter, I realized that continuing the club was creating more stress and anxiety for me than joy, and the other officers were also not very passionate about the club. Remaining member attendance was inconsistent and the activities Earth Club participated in felt trivial. Reflecting on the downfall of Earth Club, I realize that I was dedicating so much time to the club because I felt obligated to, not because I was enjoying myself or passionate about the club. Earth Club had also no clear vision or focus, and that made it difficult to organize activities, advertise, and retain membership. Despite the stress and anxiety that managing Earth Club was, this experience later helped me better lead my own coalition for my CEP Senior Project in spring quarter.

During my last quarter at the University of Washington I focused on finishing up my Senior Project, continuing to lead Empowered Eco-Education, and working towards securing a future for both. As the second year of leading Empowered Eco-Education by myself, I finally felt confident in facilitating the course, the UW students, and the elementary students. Empowered Eco-Education has been rewarding and only reinforced to me how much I care and value education. In order to secure its continuation, I have been talking with UW students interested in continuing the course in the future and also creating a facilitator guide that future course facilitators can reference. As for my Senior Project, by spring quarter, it has evolved into creating a student coalition to continue to advocate for and work with UW students, faculty, and administration to implement a sustainability graduation requirement. Creating, organizing, and preparing a coalition to continue my project after I graduate has been challenging, but also validating. It is inspiring to meet and work with other students who want to continue it after I leave. Although I have also passed a resolution through the ASUW Student Senate receiving non-binding support for the idea of a sustainability requirement, finding a group of students who care about the project as much as I do is what makes this project and its success feel real and possible.

Now as spring quarter and my last year at the University of Washington comes to a close, I cannot help but reflect on what my journey here has been like. This reflection does not even tell the whole story—I omitted my study abroad experiences, for example—but I believe that it reflects the larger narrative of what struggles I experienced during my time at the University of Washington, and what I learned from my time here.

Even though I do not plan on going into the planning field, I am glad that I chose to major in CEP. In CEP I was able to develop critical soft skills that are applicable to every career field, such as how to facilitate discussion, work with others, and run a meeting. I learned how planning is relevant to and touches every field, and although I did not focus on studying planning, I feel like I can apply and consider planning concepts to my career in the future.

Overall, I have gained not only knowledge, but I have also learned and developed skills while at the UW. I have learned to lead, to negotiate, to teach, to recruit, and to organize. I have found new passions and reached interests. I feel like I spent some of my earlier time in college doing what I thought I should do and I have learned now to embrace what I want to do. I wish I had taken more risks and tried more things I knew nothing about. Yet at the same time, I am grateful for everything that I experienced during my time here, even activities and commitments which I stressed me out at the time, I have walked away with valuable connections and experiences. Even Earth Club, which I consider my greatest failure here, has brought me joy, and the connections I made through Earth Club has helped me even after it ended—previous members have been an enormous asset to my Senior Project.

Looking to the next chapter of my life, it is also full of confidence and uncertainty. I was offered a position in Illinois to work for the National Park Service’s Lincoln Adult Home National Historical Site, and I have chosen to accept. It was a difficult decision, as it is far from my family and friends and it is a new place, and the Park Service is not exactly how I imagined I would be pursuing either sustainability or education, but after leaving this university and doing so many meaningful things here, I feel ambitious, excited, and ready to see how the next chapter unfolds.