Eighty Years of Dust
A History of Drought in the Midwest

Blowing Changes
by Bruce Boyd Raeburn

A Town, A Tornado, and a Team
by Jack Rozdilsky & Nick Swope

Outside the Walls
by Zachary Lamb
“Hey Dr. Peek! I never even knew there was such a thing as emergency management. Do you think that I could do an internship at the City of Fort Collins and learn more about this?”

“I was really excited to hear that you and other faculty work with undergraduates to provide them with research experiences or to connect them with disaster-focused internships. I really want to go to graduate school. Can I come to your office hours and talk to you about this?”

“I grew up in Mississippi and my family was affected by Katrina. It never occurred to me, though, that I could get involved in this field of hazards and disasters as part of my future. Could you please let me know what opportunities might be available to help me learn more and explore if this might be the career path for me?”

THE ABOVE QUOTATIONS are excerpts from emails that I have received from students at Colorado State University. These are representative and indicative of the types of inquiries I regularly find in my inbox. It was students’ curiosity, excitement, and desire to engage with the local community that inspired our development of disaster-focused internships for students.

At CSU, like at many other institutions of higher education, we have a growing number of students who are interested in the human consequences of hazards and disasters. These students develop these interests for a variety of reasons, including, for example, having had a personal experience with disaster; being exposed to media coverage of major events; taking courses in this area; reading about the theoretical and practical implications of disaster planning, response, and recovery; and hearing guest lectures from researchers and local practitioners. This last point is especially important, as having direct contact with people working in the field opens the students up to an entire world of professional and academic possibilities that they may not have previously even considered.

Because students often learn the best by doing, and because we had the infrastructure in place through our sociology internship program, I set out to develop internship opportunities for students in collaboration with local emergency managers.

INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

In the summer of 2012, I mailed a letter to nearly 100 different emergency management and disaster-focused agencies and organizations in Colorado. In the letter, I explained how the internship process works at CSU and asked whether or not they might have space for an undergraduate intern, should a person become interested in that particular organization. Nearly one-third responded and agreed to be added to our potential internship list (it can be viewed here: http://sociology.colostate.edu/docs/past-internships.pdf). These individuals represented 31 different public and private-sector organizations working across the disaster lifecycle (from preparedness to long-term recovery and mitigation) in Colorado communities.

INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

Over the past three years, nine of our undergraduate students have chosen to work in emergency management focused internships through the City of Fort Collins Emergency Management and the Department of Public Health. The students are required to spend 150 hours in the organization of their choosing. Thanks to a strong collaborative relationship with our local emergency manager, Mike Gavin, we have established a model where we work together—faculty, student, and intern sponsor—to ensure that the intern is developing core knowledge, skills, and abilities, known as KSAs, through the internship experience. Those on the academic side are good at transmitting knowledge, but may know less about the day-to-day skills and abilities required within a given organization. This is the critical juncture where the internship model can be especially effective. And in order to bring the entire process to life, we have found that several key steps should be followed, more or less in this order:

• ensure the intern understands the academic expectations;
• facilitate an early meeting (or series of meetings) between the intern and the intern supervisor, to clarify goals and work expectations;
• develop a concrete work plan and schedule;
• connect specific tasks to broader knowledge, skills, and ability gains;
• establish a system for regular check in between the student, the academic supervisor, and the internship supervisor;
• end the internship with a culminating experience, where the intern prepares a presentation or portfolio, summarizing outcomes of the experience.

So what can emergency management interns actually do for themselves and for the organizations where they work? And what, in concrete terms, do they actually gain from the internship?

The CSU interns have been part of meetings that allowed them to see how organizations work, and how people work together within and across emergency management organizations. One intern noted excitedly that at her first meeting, she had the chance to “meet people from all levels of government working to reduce hazards risk.” She said later that she had no idea that there were so many different agencies involved, and that this helped her to better understand “what the textbooks were saying,” but that she did not fully “get it” until seeing the process in person.

Thanks to the intern supervisors, the students are often strongly encouraged to reach out and to network with people working in many different aspects of emergency management. This may be something as simple as encouraging the student to introduce him or herself to someone new at each meeting, or to more actively network to learn about new resources and opportunities.

Some of our most ambitious students have figured out how to connect their academic coursework to their internship, resulting in new opportunities and breakthroughs. One such example happened a couple of years ago, when Samantha LaFever, an undergraduate sociology major, took a course that exposed her to the growing number of “grandfamilies” – grandparents raising their children’s children. She became curious about whether this was an issue in terms of disaster preparedness and response, especially since she knew that children and the elderly are often considered among the most vulnerable in disasters. When she took this idea to her internship supervisor, he was equally intrigued and encouraged her to pursue this research and to see if she could come up with a tangible output. In the end, LaFever did such a great job that her supervisor took her to a conference where she had the chance to present her findings and recommendations to emergency managers. Later, LaFever said this was one of her “proudest moments” as an undergraduate and one of her “greatest learning experiences.”

Some of the best internship supervisors, like Gavin, not only encourage students to follow their passions, but also help them to identify new resources and opportunities that will help them grow as budding professionals. For instance, Gavin allows all of his students to use their required intern hours to complete the Federal Emergency Agency’s Emergency Management Institute classes that help them dive into the lexicon of emergency management and use the terminology themselves. He also takes them to training sessions and other meetings, that help students increase their knowledge, build their skill set, and enhance their abilities and capabilities.

Students clearly gain a great deal from these internship opportunities. They regularly report that these experiences help them learn and grow. They develop new professional networks. They are exposed to different ways of thinking and acting. And they often become more confident, professional, and mature. In short, and as one recent intern said, “For the first time, I really felt like I was ready to have a real job!” And another wrote in her evaluation, “It is more than just the job skills I received. For the first time I actually feel focused and passionate about where I am going in my life. I think I can make a difference in this world, and this is the space where I want to be.”

The internship supervisors also get something out of the process. Obviously, there is some personal satisfaction associated with helping students to succeed. But even more than that, it helps them to “feel more confident about the future of emergency management in general.” The best students “bring new ideas and energy” to the office. They also can help complete mundane day-to-day tasks as well as more complex duties associated with the job.

In the end, we think this is a win-win for all involved, and look forward to continuing to build the program over future years.

This article was written in collaboration with Samantha LaFever, Sociology undergraduate alumna, Colorado State University, and Mike Gavin, Emergency Manager, City of Fort Collins, Colorado

LORI PEEK is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Co-Director of the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis at Colorado State University. She is author of the multiple award-winning book, Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11, co-editor of Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora, and co-author of Children of Katrina. In addition to her post-9/11 and post-Hurricane Katrina studies, she has also conducted research on disaster preparedness among child care providers in Colorado; youth recovery after the 2011 Joplin tornado; the potential physical and mental health effects of the 2010 BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the effects of Superstorm Sandy on children and youth; risk perception and evacuation behavior among residents of the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic Coasts; disaster preparedness for persons with disabilities; and earthquake risk reduction practices in seven countries. Peek teaches classes on contemporary race and ethnic relations, the sociology of disasters, and qualitative research methods.