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Summary & Evaluation

## **Introduction**

In this document, my “Summary & Evaluation,” I reflect on my educational path through Western and specifically Fairhaven College and my interdisciplinary concentration in Regenerative Design, Ecological Solutions, and Craft. I hope to not only learn through this cathartic act of reflection and composition, but to convey what college has come to mean to me, how it has shaped my life, and the most critical elements of this growth. While it might be convenient to propose some grand theme running through my college years which connects the scattered dots of my learning, the path I have taken is not so easily abbreviated. However, one great takeaway I have seen as I look back over my education is the ultimate purpose of a university education. While I have often claimed that college is primarily about acquiring accreditation, in the back of my mind I have maintained that it still holds purpose as the means of learning a given field. Yet as I ponder my education alongside the post-college life paths of many acquaintances, I am inclined to admit that college is really about learning how to learn. It is easy to get sucked into one field of study at a university and believe that this must be your future. In reality, if you have gotten the most out of your education, completing college should leave you with the skills to dive into whatever topic you wish to pursue further.

This realization, obvious to many but revolutionary to me, recalls to my memory an experience in a freshman year honors course. In this class we were assigned various pieces of literature, some excerpts of classic books, other modern novels, and some essays. Throughout the quarter I struggled to find a connection between the texts or engage with a clear theme. Meanwhile, the professor remained aloof, moving the class towards discussion and restraining to share his insights. Despite pushing the class to arrive at some very certain conclusion through our discussions, he remained unwilling to let on to what this might be. However, on the last day, he proceeded to give a captivating lecture which tied all of our class readings together into a coherent narrative, finally displaying what he had been trying to let us find on our own. If he had given us this lecture earlier on, or chosen more obvious texts, I never would have understood the concept he was relating at the same depth. Similarly, I must play the role of my professor as I look back over my time at Western, pulling an idea from here, a memory from there, to weave together a narrative which synthesizes my education.

## **Greatest Learning Experience**

In order to identify my greatest learning experiences, I began sorting through memories, looking for clearly defined moments which marked some great transition or moment of realization.

Yet after pondering the question a while, I began to realize that, at least for me, learning and growing does not occur at a set moment, but rather is a process which unfolds over a period. With this fresh and more accurate idea of what constitutes a defining learning moment I was able to identify some key periods of growth in my life.

My homeschool education stretched from the beginning of my schooling through seventh grade. This schooling took a more flexible format than you might expect. Each year my mother would give me textbooks, one for each class I was “taking,” and instruct me to do one lesson a day, take a test when I reached the end of a chapter, and finish the book by the end of the school year. Besides grading tests, answering the occasional question, and administering end of the year, state-required testing, my mother did little to teach me. This hands-off schooling forced me to quickly learn to teach myself and absorb information through reading a textbook. These skills for quickly acquiring concepts without explicit instruction have remained with me as I found that this “jumping in the deep end” approach can be an incredibly efficient way to learn.

While my time as a homeschooled student forced me to teach myself, it did little to expose me to social interactions or new ideas from outside my parent’s ideological bubble. Transitioning to a private high school brought me into contact with many peers, yet the Christian qualifications of the school narrowed the diversity of these students. This resulted in many terrifying chances to begin building social skills but failed to provide me with new perspectives. Further, what little variety of opinion my fellow students held was easily stifled by social pressure to conform. When I reached college, I was inundated with hundreds of new people coming from diverse backgrounds and all more free from social insecurity than my high school peers. As I began to test my feeble social skills in this arena of cohorts, I started a new phase of growth. This exposure to fresh ideas gave me the opportunity to use the skills of independent learning I had acquired as a child and begin wandering outside the stiff confines of my parent’s worldview. As many who have left behind strict familiar worldviews can likely relate, I still feel myself pushing back against the experiences, stories, and evidence which challenge my current beliefs. However, just as I may have felt completely lost in the midst of a complex sentence diagram in sixth grade, I can look back on confusion and uncertainty and see a learning process only delayed by stubbornness. While my childhood taught me to be confident in my own knowledge, college continues to school me in the practice of listening to, valuing, and learning through other’s perspectives.

## **Problem Solving & Creative Risk Taking**

My time at Western has given me the opportunity to view problem solving from many angles. Some classes have provided me with specific methods for overcoming esoteric problems while others have given me the chance to address problems in unconventional manners. Through these courses I learned the intricacy of problem solving and how important it is to develop unique approaches to designing solutions.

An independent study I took on Salmonid Habitat & Ecology in the Pacific Northwest had a substantial impact on my approach to problems. Through this ISP I latched onto the experience of interacting with Salmonids and their habitat on a personal level. Days of tromping through dense Pacific underbrush in search of some hole which might produce a beautiful shimmering Coho, brought me into an interaction with Salmon in a way a textbook never could. This experience forced me to confront a depressing and overwhelming issue and through it I discovered a deep sadness accompanied by a sliver of hope. Having a stake in an issue, a connection to it, gives you the fire required to combat difficult problems and find creative solutions. Furthermore, this connection shows that ultimately it matters simply that you cared, understood, and tried, even if you could not resolve the problem.

Surrounded by assimilation, it can be difficult to find spaces to practice creative risk-taking without costing yourself too much. I found a perfect space for this in a Fairhaven class titled “Art & Identity,” which focused on exploring identity through art. As I built my concentration around the concept of “craft,” I was interested in exploring how the act of making and creating can be a part of expressing identity. I explored this idea through three dimensional crafts from wood-working to sewing. Most of the pieces I made were far from what I had been classically taught to consider art. For instance, as one project I taught myself to darn and used this skill to repair an old sweatshirt. Presenting my work in class, I was surprised by my peers’ willingness to engage with this uncommon art. Through these experiences I learned that I find inspiration in unconventional solutions and that “outside the box” concepts are worth exploring.

While many of my classes broadly addressed problem solving, “Agroecology and Permaculture Design” gave me an explicit approach to interpreting complex problems. The final project for this course was to take “permaculture” principles and apply them to designing a self-sustaining homestead. Though permaculture is justly criticized for marketing indigenous farming practices without acknowledgement, it does an excellent job of describing practical approaches to problem solving. These approaches stress the importance of thoroughly observing the problem first,

weighing the benefits against the costs, and being willing to adapt over time. While this approach is intended for creating regenerative agricultural systems, it can be applied more broadly to any aspect of life. Through this type of problem solving I learned the strengths of methodical approaches to finding solutions which emphasize critical observation and stress the importance of attainability.

### **Critical Insights & Social Justice**

College has been a time of immense growth for me, both in and out of my education. An awareness of personal privilege and social equality as well as a responsibility to work towards systemic change have been important elements of this process. Personally, these transformations appeared as I became aware of my own privilege and had the opportunity to learn from those who are marginalized within today's society. Through my classes, I learned about many critical social issues of which I would have remained oblivious. These courses forced me to critically evaluate the social, political, and economic systems in which I live and identify how these are constructed to benefit those with wealth and power. I have also grown in my conviction to work towards social equality through the development of my concentration, as the study of product design and its relation to social and environmental injustice has convinced me of the oppressive force of consumerism.

One area of social awareness I have seen particularly blossom through college is my attitude towards feminism. I came to Western with the ignorant and sexist perception that women had both already gained equality within America and yet were less well suited for certain tasks than men. Thus, I was incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from women about their experiences and struggles, and for them to give me trust and patience as I reformed my own warped ideas. In concert with these stories, my classes taught me about feminist theory and the history of sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny which clearly show the injustices women face in our society. These realizations have not just made me aware of my privilege as a man but forced me to confront how I can work to deconstruct sexism. I continually work to put this conviction into action as I monitor my own behavior to avoid sexist attitudes and language, confront men when they are oppressing women, and advocate for the women around me to have the opportunities they deserve and their voices to be justly heard.

Summarizing the many chances I have had to learn about important social issues in my classes would be an unrealistic task. I hope that through one potent example of this growth I can show the impact my courses have had on my awareness of social justice. Through two classes –

Agroecology & Permaculture Design and Food & Power – I learned about the global issue of genetically modified crops and the corporate seed industry. I had never heard of this issue, but through these classes I learned how global chemical corporations have used GM crop development to gain a monopoly over seeds and drive small farmers out of business. Furthermore, I can put this awareness into action by choosing to purchase “non-GMO” products wherever possible and share this critical knowledge with my peers. This example of GMO seeds has been especially salient for me as it demonstrates how small changes in my own lifestyle can have an impact on a global issue.

I have also worked to include issues surrounding social justice in my concentration. While my area of interest focuses on reforming product design towards sustainability, social equity is entangled in this effort. From the social importance of environmental regeneration to just labor, social equity is tied to sustainable product design. A nuanced point of connection between these two fields is the link between consumerism and social prejudice. Industrial design is deeply integrated with capitalistic economic theories which emphasize marketing that convinces “consumers” to buy more products. These attempts have many social ramifications from pushing individuals to use products to present their identity to forcing them to spend money on products for the sake of social conformity. Objects are widely used throughout American to identifying social class and membership within groups. Those who cannot afford these signifying objects (iPhones, Toyota Tacomas, or Carharts to name a few of the Pacific Northwest’s favorites) are seen as outsiders who do not belong in certain social settings or communities. These distinctions run along the same socio-economic lines which follow entrenched male, white wealth in America and are used as tools of racism, sexism, and classism. I believe that by breaking down these consumeristic barriers we can relieve socio-economic, gender, and racial discrimination.

The topics addressed in my concentration are a microcosm of the social justice issues which are tied up in every field of study. As we live in a system built by the rich and powerful on the backs of the oppressed, we can see how social equality is linked to every aspect of our culture, economy, government etc. The ability to critically observe and question these institutions to see how they are upholding social injustice and could be reformed is one of the greatest gifts I have received from my college education.

### **Important Texts**

Reading papers, articles, and in particular books has been a tremendously important aspect of my university education. Asked to reflect on some influential texts, these two books immediately

came to mind. The first, *Craeft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts* by Alexander Langlands was recommended to me by one of my most respected professors and I quickly gobbled up this fascinating text as research for my concentration. *The Shepard's Life* by James Rebanks surprised me as an assigned reading for an Ethnoecology class, but became one of my favorite books and continues to frame my outlook on purpose, success, and happiness along with many other critical topics.

*Craeft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts* is written by a British archeologist who explores the history, evolution, and importance of classic English crafts. Alexander Langlands describes the skill of craft as a special type of knowledge which, while largely lost in today's society, ties together your mind and body. Furthermore, mastering these skills connects the craftspeople to their landscapes, materials and work with a fulfillment absent from most modern capitalist labor. Through describing the many crafts practiced throughout English history he explains how they allowed humans to live sustainable lifestyles in which we used hand skills to turn the natural materials surrounding us into solutions to diverse and complex problems. Langlands argues that in order to find sustainable solutions to today's problems we ought to look back to the closed loop craft systems which humans have used throughout history.

This text encapsulates what I am most interested in studying through college and the topics which I hoped to tie together within my concentration. I am fascinated by Langlands' link between sustainability and physical work, small scale production, and locally sourced materials. This text gave me a chance to hear a fresh opinion on how the art of creating can be applied in environmentally and socially regenerative ways. It also taught me about many beautiful and largely forgotten crafts which created ingenious and simple solutions. Langlands' writing inspired me to stay the course of my concentration and continue to aspire to the field of small-scale and hand-done design and to strive towards that special knowledge and relationship only found in the mastery of a craft.

In his memoir *The Shepherd's Life*, James Rebanks describes his life as a sheep farmer in the Lake District of northern England. While telling his story of growing up in a family who has farmed sheep for as long as memory stretches, Rebanks addresses his connection to land, work and fulfillment in life. Living as a traditional shepherd in a valley prized for its natural beauty and outdoor recreation, Rebanks turns a critical eye on how western culture connects with nature. Additionally, he explores how physical work and rural lifestyles have been degraded in a modern society which glorifies higher education, mental work and the urban lifestyle. As a high school

dropout turned Oxford graduate, Rebanks is able to take a knowledgeable yet approachable angle to investigating these issues.

This book painted a novel idea of what success means in life and the path you ought to take to reach fulfillment. Growing up in the suburbs of the Midwest I felt alienated from the work I was forced to pursue in school and disconnected from the land on which I lived. This lack of fulfillment compelled me to view leaving home and pursuing outdoor recreation as the only means to satisfy my craving for a meaningful life. I was deeply impacted by this book's emphasis on the importance of being from and of a place and the ability to find meaning through work which is passed down through generations. It was also reassuring to see my own observations mirrored in Rebanks' perspectives on the disenfranchisement of physical labor in modern society. As I look past graduation, I aspire to make a career out of working with my hands and long to find a connection with a landscape which echoes the experiences Rebanks chronicles.

### **Self Evaluations**

Looking back over one's academic history is difficult; it is hard for me to recall or find in my evaluations tangible proof of improved skills. Yet by un-focusing my critical lens, I can see trends in my performance in and attitude toward classes. The blunt honesty of my evaluations displays an increased responsibility to complete class material as I progressed through Fairhaven. Tracking my professor's feedback on the assignments I submitted, I see that the projects I was interested in and committed to received far better comments than those I struggled to engage with. I can also see a change in the way I involved myself in class discussions as I moved away from an argumentative attitude and grew more willing to listen to and learn from my peers. Early in my time at Fairhaven, it was common for me to express in my evaluations that a class was "not what I expected" but as I took more courses, I seemed to be more comfortable not knowing what direction a class might head. Additionally, as I progress through Fairhaven, I gained opportunities to take independent studies, write my concentration, and have greater autonomy over my class projects. In this I see an increased independence and responsibility for my education as I shaped the course of my concentration and worked to link classes to my interests. Through these changes, I am able to group my educational growth into two main categories - individual responsibility and openness to new ideas.

The development of individual responsibility can be seen through many aspects of my evolving self-evaluations. My increased care for completing reading assignments and attending class

is salient evidence of this transformation. A desire to put in the necessary work to seize opportunities for personal learning through independent studies similarly displays my growth. Reading through the independent study self-evaluations I can see that they were especially influential courses as I got to specifically target areas of interest. The weight of college's costs, monetary and temporal, increasingly weighed on me as I progressed, resulting in greater dedication to my studies.

An increased openness to new ideas and experiences is evident in my class participation and my perception of discussion courses. Coming into college, I felt sure of my worldview and my ability to “correctly” synthesize and understand academic ideas. This misplaced self-confidence led me to treat class discussions as an interesting arena to debate topics in rather than an opportunity to share diverse opinions. My participation in classes mirrored these ideas as I eagerly argued my opinion more for the sake of sport than intellectual advancement. As I progressed through college, I realized the value of deeply considering other's insights in a discussion and the importance of learning through listening to peers. This realization was accentuated by an awareness of my privilege as a white man and my responsibility to monitor myself in order to make room for other's ideas. I also grew more open in my expectations of classes. When I started at Fairhaven, I held strict ideas of what material a class would contain, and if these assumptions were unmet, I would complain about the course. Through repeatedly garnering unexpected knowledge from classes I learned it is best to follow each course in the direction the professor and my fellow students wish to take it and learn as much as I can along the way. This more flexible approach has allowed me to engage with ideas I otherwise never would have encountered.

Though I have been able to synthesize some progression through my Fairhaven career, I deeply struggle with self-assessment, and to “self-assess” self-evaluations is an even more strenuous task. Many of the classes I have taken outside Fairhaven provided me with concrete skills and knowledge which are easily listed off, but the growth I have experienced within Fairhaven has been more abstract. How does one quantify or express advancement in their ability to grapple with multidimensional issues or interest in learning unexplored material? Furthermore, this reflection on my college career is filled with disappointment – I just spent this much money and time, but did I really learn enough for it to be worthwhile? Throughout my self-evaluations I see a consistent trend of unmet expectations, both through the courses I took and my own performance. In their classes, professors unleash a world of new knowledge and yet finding the time and energy to fully explore every interesting topic introduced by a course remains unattainable. I went through all these courses,

put in this much effort, and yet I do not feel like I have scratched the surface of what I could have learned. I would like to take an optimistic view on these opinions and not simply allow myself to resign to the conclusion that the modern educational system remains inadequate. The brightest side of this reaction to my education I can find is that it shows that I care, despite all my disillusion with college and its bureaucracy, and I truly want to learn. I hope that I can carry these expectations forward with me as I leave college and that I will continue to hold myself to high standards of acquiring knowledge.

### **Concentration Reflection**

I find encouragement in reading back over my concentration and seeing that it encapsulates the studies I remain interested in pursuing and coherently communicates my educational goals. This is not to say that I never deviated from my original plan. In some areas I have branched away from my proposal to explore areas I had not anticipated and in other realms I lacked class opportunities to achieve the goals of my concentration. As I read my concentration, I can see areas which I propose as broad curiosities that I would be intrigued to dive into in depth. Unfortunately, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning has also significantly limited my ability to engage with my concentration and find opportunities to fulfill its potential. Overall, I am proud of what I created and am glad for the opportunity to pursue these fascinating studies, but I also recognize that I could have learned much more. Collegiate studies are a vast realm, with many fascinating corners, certainly four years is not enough time to fully explore these avenues of knowledge.

I have continued to grow in my passion for regenerative design, ecological solutions, and craft, and see these studies as crucial in carrying me forward into future career opportunities. Some specific areas of my concentration which I dug into at a greater depth than I expected were agricultural and ethnoecological studies. While I had not predicted that these would be the most influential classes I would take, Fairhaven's professors specializing in these studies offered courses which brought me to discover how these areas of knowledge tie in with ecological and regenerative design. I was especially excited to learn about the craft of indigenous farming practices through Professor John Tuxill's Ethnobotany class and see how this field investigates the connections between local craft, system design, and regenerative solutions. I had also not anticipated that I would be able to do an internship at Corax Skis and have the opportunity to learn about composite

ski craft. This internship is one of the highlights of my education, and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to tie this pertinent experience into my concentration.

Just as I gained opportunities to learn in new fields, I can also see ideas laid out in my plan which I never explored in depth. I wish I had more opportunities to study the concrete skills of design and craft such as sketching, carpentry, metalwork, and sewing. While I had hoped to create ISPs which would help me to developed design skills, I quickly saw the advantage of prioritizing classes created by Fairhaven's faculty. As I spent money and time to be in this institution, I decided it would optimize my investment to take offered classes rather than simply paying the school to accredit my personal studies. As I plan past college, I look forward to having the time to build design skills on my own and to look for internships which will equip me with new crafting abilities.

In my concentration I write "I am specifically interested in... commercial concepts of what it means for a product to be "used," "new," "worn out," or "necessary," and the shifting of design to prioritize functionality over appearance." While these topics and concepts have been in the back of my mind throughout my studies, I have not gotten the opportunity to specifically investigate them. I believe the psychology surrounding product marketing and consumerism has major social and ecological consequences and that by addressing these ideologies we could move towards more sustainable and fulfilling lives. I similarly look forward to opportunities to spread awareness about the importance of the material objects that we buy and use, and that through choosing products carefully and using them till they are worn out we can have tangible impacts on our communities. Like crafting and design skills, I hope to pursue this conviction as I move past graduation and into the working world.

One last and undeniably unfortunate reality of my concentration is that I completed these studies during the COVID-19 global pandemic. This period of world turmoil has had many impacts on my individual education from forcing me into online classes (a format I never would have chosen) to limiting learning opportunities like hands-on classes, internships and ISPs to isolating me from students and professors. Furthermore, these realities made it difficult to absorb the material in my classes to the depth I would have liked. I am frustrated and saddened by the missed chances and diminished quality of my education, but I must also acknowledge my privilege as I was able to continue my schooling at all within this time of upheaval. Furthermore, these years have been a practice in building resilience and finding rays of light amidst the darkness. I feel this ability to continue despite disenchantment will be an important strength as I look toward the hardships facing my generation. There are always opportunities to learn and grow, even if they are not in the way you

expected, so despite these shortcomings I can look back over my Fairhaven concentration with a sense of fulfillment as I am thankful for the path I chose and all that I have encountered along the way.

## **Conclusion**

These recollections on my university education bring a harsh juxtaposition of thoughts. I feel simultaneously disappointed with my education and incredibly grateful that I had this opportunity. Intrinsic to this discussion is the notion of privilege. Yet this acknowledgement of social and economic advantage does not negate misgivings about my experience or my critiques of Western Washington and Fairhaven College. I came to Fairhaven because I am passionate about finding ways to study what captivates me. Furthermore, I came to this program because I felt out of place in the college setting and perceived Fairhaven as the place to go if you feel lost within the conventional collegiate system. After two years in Fairhaven college, I still feel as out of place as I did in Western's Industrial Design program. Nevertheless, these uncomfortable experiences have proven themselves as growing and learning periods throughout my life. Being in classes, and a college which did not align with my academic pursuits forced me to be confident in my own interest and opened my mind to the intersectionality between all fields of study.

My time at Western and Fairhaven was not what I hoped, but it has molded me into the person I am today, introduced me to many critical studies, and given me the opportunity pursue my curiosity. For all this I am grateful. I also see that college is a stepping-stone and I am excited to explore the opportunities it will open for me. Knowing that university is not the only space in which I can learn, I eagerly look forward to finding spaces in which to grow, thrive and find a sense of belonging. I am particularly excited to spend more time learning with my hands and to get the chance to put the abstract concepts I have been exploring into concrete action. As I depart college, I look back over my education with a sigh of relief, knowing that despite what I wish could have been otherwise, I have, slowly, learned how to learn. I have proven to myself an ability to pursue what piques my interest. With hope I look forward to finding the setting in which I can best apply my interests in participating in regeneration within communities through craft.

## **Works Cited**

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