

Capstone: Lauren Arnone
Hispanic Studies Practical Experience through the Community Action Committee (CAC)

Introductory Reflection

Before attending the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to study Language and World Business with a concentration in Hispanic Studies, my interest in and passion for the Spanish language began in elementary school. Spanish was first introduced to me as a student as an elective beginning in kindergarten, and I was immediately gravitated toward it. Activities as simple learning the colors of the rainbow, how to introduce myself, and short phrases to express emotions using the Spanish verb “*tener*” sparked an unquenchable curiosity. As I entered the seventh grade, I was accepted into my middle school’s accelerated Spanish program, and, as part of the program, Spanish became a core class that I attended every day. In these accelerated middle school courses is when I started learning new verb tenses as well as learning about Hispanic culture and all the places Spanish is spoken around the world. After two years in this accelerated program and with this new knowledge of the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking world, I knew I wanted to continue my Spanish education in high school.

After taking my high school’s placement test, I was able to continue my Spanish education in high school beginning at the junior level. This allowed me to complete novel studies as part of my Spanish curriculum, to grow in essay writing and conversation in AP Spanish, to take college-level Spanish courses through dual-enrollment programs, and to gain practical experience through volunteering and even teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to native Spanish-speakers in the local Knoxville community. It was this practical application of my Spanish knowledge and skills that inspired me to not only continue my Spanish education in college but to make it a part of my primary major. As a Spanish student, and even more so as a World Languages and Cultures student, at the University of Tennessee I have had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of and fluency in Spanish, pursue the study of both Spanish

linguistics as well as Spanish literature, apply the foundations of the Spanish language to my studies of other romance languages, specifically French and Portuguese, participate in an advanced Spanish language study abroad program and immersive homestay experience in Alicante, Spain, and finally gain practical experience through my internship with the Community Action Committee (CAC) through their Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. As is reflected in my Spanish education and experiences leading up to this internship, interning with CAC VITA was truly a culmination of my career as a Spanish student and combined my passions for language and serving the Knoxville community. Not only was I able to improve my reading and listening comprehension as well as my writing and speaking skills in Spanish, but I was also able to see and learn more about the local Hispanic community in Knoxville.

Overview of the Community Action Committee

For my capstone project, I was able to apply my Spanish as well as my Language and World Business studies by working as an intern at the Community Action Committee (CAC) in the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) department. Specifically, I interned through CAC Knoxville at the L.T. Ross Building, which is their location off Western Avenue in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee. The CAC is a local non-profit organization, operating to meet a community need for the collective public and social benefit of the greater Knoxville area. The community need VITA seeks to fulfill in their operations is the service of preparing and filing taxes for qualifying low-income households in the Knoxville area. VITA is able to prepare and file these taxes under the guidance of the head of the VITA program, Mr. Terry Reed, and thanks to the help of volunteer tax preparers and greeters, as well as through the resources available to VITA through the CAC, the City of Knoxville, Knox County, and the Internal Revenue Service

(IRS). Because VITA operates largely through the help of volunteers, the only professional staff is the head of the VITA program, Mr. Terry Reed, and the VITA receptionist, Ms. Lula. On a typical day, VITA also has between six and eight volunteer tax preparers as well as one to two greeters working with clients who schedule by appointment. This is specific to the CAC Knoxville VITA site where I interned, but there is also a neighboring VITA site located in Cokesbury that works in tandem with the L.T. Ross location of CAC VITA and VITA sites nationally located in states across the country.

Overview of the Experience

Displayed Knowledge/Skills

I was able to transfer the knowledge and skills I have gained in the classroom to a typical day working as an intern at the CAC VITA site. Specifically, the knowledge I gained from my Accounting, Finance, Language and Culture of the Hispanic Business World, and Marketing courses aided me in performing to my highest potential as an intern and were skills I utilized every day. In a typical day working at the CAC VITA site, I was working intake, greeting and communicating with clients, and collecting relevant tax documents. Regarding special tasks, I also interviewed clients when necessary to ensure that their taxes were filed properly and adhered to IRS guidelines, completed basic tax preparation, and performed quality reviews. Having background knowledge in Accounting and Finance through my introductory courses in these subject areas allowed me to more fully understand the vocabulary and abbreviations related to these fields and tax preparation. This prior knowledge allowed me to better serve our clients and learn and pick up information quickly when it came to training and on-the-job learning and adapting.

Additionally, due to the large Spanish-speaking population in East Tennessee, I was able to use my target language, Spanish, almost every day on the job. This greatly enriched my experience and incorporated knowledge I had gained from the Language and Culture of the Hispanic Business World course I had taken the previous semester. Because of this course, I had the Spanish vocabulary and transferrable knowledge of many areas of business as they pertain to Hispanic language and culture, which I was able to apply to my work and interactions with clients. Knowing something as simple as dates being written day/month/year in the Spanish-speaking world allowed me to ensure that our client's birthdates were input into our online system properly and that their tax returns were then accepted by the IRS. Furthermore, having the accounting and finance Spanish vocabulary allowed me to communicate with clients in the target language to ask clarifying questions, answer any questions they had, and communicate information from their tax preparer regarding their taxes. Overall, being able to use my Spanish skills enriched my experience by allowing me to practice my business-related vocabulary and become more fluid in conversation on complex topics through problem solving in conversation with clients. In addition to this, I was also able to contribute to CAC VITA's overall mission of fulfilling a community need by being able to communicate with clients in their desired language effectively.

In addition to the use of my knowledge from Accounting, Finance, and Language and Culture of the Hispanic Business World courses, I also completed my internship alongside the completion of my Marketing 300 course and was able to apply what I was learning in class to marketing in non-profit businesses. In my Marketing 300 class, we have talked a lot about meeting customer needs, enhancing customer experiences, and carrying out the company mission. Typically, in this Marketing course we discuss how these marketing concepts are

carried out in big, for-profit companies like Amazon and Target or start-ups like Dollar Shave Club and Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream, but it was even more interesting to see how these concepts were carried out in my internship especially because CAC VITA is a non-profit organization. CAC VITA is able to meet customer needs by helping qualifying families become more independent and self-sufficient by providing needed services, specifically filing federal taxes. These customer experiences are enhanced through the CAC's commitment to promote a culture that encourages, supports, and celebrates inclusivity, which is evidenced by the excellent customer service provided by volunteers and the way volunteers interact with clients with respect, kindness, and integrity. The way in which the CAC VITA department meets customer needs and enhances customer experiences allows the CAC as an organization to accomplish their mission of helping people of all ages thrive by promoting a spirit of hope, delivering quality services, and building effective community partnerships at all levels, showing the marketing concepts I have studied in class in action in the non-profit space. Overall, the knowledge and skills I have developed in the classroom through applying my Accounting, Finance, Language and Culture of the Hispanic Business World, and Marketing courses allowed me to get the most out of this experience and perform at a higher level.

Learning Outcomes

In my capstone project proposal for the CAC VITA internship, I discussed my desire to complete this internship for my capstone experience because of the opportunity to develop my critical thinking skills, professionalism and work ethic, and intercultural fluency. Through my experience working as an intern at the CAC VITA site this semester, I was successfully able to achieve these desired learning outcomes and more. First, I was able to develop and practice utilizing my critical thinking skills through training in basic tax preparation and day-to-day

problem solving on the job. Learning, training, and testing to prepare basic taxes exercised and developed my critical thinking skills because I was learning information that was completely new and had to learn regulations and exceptions to rules for a wide array of income tax and household situations. Additionally, working through information from the tax preparation textbook and working through practice problems required me to think critically to learn and apply this information as well as work through unique income and family circumstances as they applied to the tax return. Following training, as I worked on the job in both intake and tax preparation, I continued to develop my critical thinking skills by working with clients through each unique return, income situation, and tax exceptions as they applied.

Working as an intern at the CAC VITA site also allowed me to develop my professionalism and work ethic because of the high standards held by the CAC and the IRS. Professionalism in the non-profit space is so important to uphold and maintain high standards of performance as well as empower the clients in need of non-profit services by operating and presenting like any other business and delivering high quality service. At the same time, it is important that both professional and volunteer staff carry themselves in a way that is professional without being supercilious. This balance and professionalism were somethings I was able to practice and develop over the course of the semester in this role and I can already see these skills transferring into my part-time roles working on campus, my summer internship, and hope to employ in my future professional career.

In addition to developing my professionalism, the CAC VITA internship also pushed me to develop in work ethic with the demanding schedule as well as the attention to detail required to meet IRS standards. Because W-2 forms are typically sent out by employers on January 31st, VITA begins preparing taxes at the beginning of February and finishes on Tax Day, April 15th.

Within the context of my internship, this meant that I completed 150 hours of unpaid work within the span of ten weeks. When you take out spring break and spring recess, this meant that I was working anywhere between 15 and 25 hours a week in addition to my other classes and paid jobs. While this pushed me by requiring me to manage my time wisely and develop a newfound patience at the end of a 10-hour long workday of tax preparation, this shows how the experience truly developed my work ethic for the better and made me that much prouder of what I was able to accomplish in those ten weeks. Additionally, the high standards held by the IRS surrounding income tax returns also pushed my work ethic by requiring me to pay attention to detail and ensure that every step of the intake, preparation, and filing processes were all completed correctly.

Finally, working in this position as a CAC VITA intern developed my intercultural fluency by giving me the opportunity to work with both Spanish and English-speaking clients as well as both Spanish and English-speaking tax preparers simultaneously. Because Spanish speakers living in East Tennessee come from various parts of the Hispanic world, I got the opportunity to speak with native Spanish speakers from Cuba, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, and even more. In addition to this exposure to Spanish speakers from many different countries, I expanded my intercultural fluency further by then connecting these clients with tax preparers with varying knowledge in and experience with the Spanish language, Hispanic culture, and international tax laws and practices. Overall, this internship greatly strengthened my intercultural fluency and exposed me to the depth and diversity of the Spanish-speaking community just here in Knoxville. Together with my developments in professionalism, work ethic, and critical thinking, the CAC VITA internship was an amazing learning and

developmental experience that allowed me to successfully accomplish the learning outcomes and goals I set for myself going into the internship.

Experience Reflection

Working as an intern at CAC VITA impacted me by both changing and reinforcing different aspects of my career goals and trajectory. One aspect of my career goals that this internship reinforced was my desire to combine my Spanish language skills with my business knowledge. Through this internship, I was able to see how a seemingly tax focused internship involved a lot of Spanish. When looking at career opportunities, I have often felt like I would have to choose either going a Spanish direction, for example interpreting or education, or a business direction, for example working in human resources or management. However, through this internship I got to see how seamlessly my Spanish language skills, even my language skills beyond just Spanish, were useful in the work setting. Because of this discovery, the CAC VITA internship both reinforced my desire to combine Spanish and business in my future career while also changing my perspective that I can still use my Spanish skills often even in a more business-related role.

In addition to learning about what kind of future career I want to pursue, I also learned a lot about myself as a person and employee. I currently work as a Resident Assistant (RA) on campus and generally think of myself as an outgoing person, who enjoys being around other people. However, during the course of this internship I learned that, while I still enjoyed working intake, greeting, and serving in other positions that involved a lot of socializing, I also really enjoyed the less social aspects of the job. For example, preparing and filing taxes or translating documents where I would sit at a desk and work independently were some of my favorite

assignments, which came as a total surprise to me. At the same time learning this about myself was beneficial, I also discovered a limitation in myself regarding my social battery and patience level for these other more social aspects of the internship. Where I thought I had endless patience and desire to work with people, I quickly learned that I am limited in how much customer service I can or want to provide in a full-time role. I found that I not only enjoyed these independent tasks to break up my day, but I also needed them in order to perform those customer service tasks as well as I possibly could.

In addition to discovering that I enjoy working independently, I also discovered how much my Spanish skills have developed after studying abroad and studying Spanish at the university level. Studying abroad helped me immensely in expanding my vocabulary, immersing me in the language and culture, and allowing me to engage more fluidly and confidently in conversation. At the beginning of the internship, it was hard for me to imagine how my Spanish skills would or even could continue to improve, and I gladly proved my past-self wrong. Over the course of the internship, I was able to employ the conversational fluidity I developed during my time abroad while continuing to expand my vocabulary relating to finance, accounting, and taxes in general. I also impressed myself by the end of the internship, pulling out words and phrases like “self-employed,” “non-taxable,” and “adjusted gross income” in Spanish. I found that problem solving in conversation with my Spanish-speaking clients greatly helped my Spanish speaking and comprehension abilities in a way I hadn’t even experienced during my time abroad. Overall, this internship, specifically the Spanish language portion, both uncovered and deepened my Spanish knowledge, vocabulary, and skills through practical application and gave me a newfound confidence when speaking. However, I know that continuing to develop my Spanish skills does not begin or end with this internship, study abroad, or my university courses,

so this internship has encouraged me to continue to improve and work on my Spanish skills independently so that I can be a better bilingual professional in the future.

In addition to how my time at CAC VITA has changed me for the better as a Spanish speaker, it also changed me as a future professional and person. Having the opportunity to work at a non-profit organization raised my awareness to the needs in our local community, especially those not currently being met. While I am not set on pursuing a career in the non-profit sector, this experience opened my eyes to how our careers impact other people. This realization has assured me that whichever direction I go in my career, I will be most fulfilled in a role that directly and positively impacts the lives of others.

Future Application

Upon graduating from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville with a Bachelor of Arts in Language and World Business, Hispanic Studies, I will be beginning my professional career as an Executive Team Leader, Human Resources at Target. In this role, I will be able to apply the lessons that I have learned through my capstone experience at the CAC to provide quality customer experiences, continue to volunteer in the Knoxville community, and impact team members positively.

My time at as an intern with CAC VITA not only gave me the confidence to provide customer service experiences in Spanish, but it also showed me the positive impact these conversations can have on clients. My Spanish business vocabulary, experience engaging in fluid and effective Spanish conversations with clients, and the necessary humility that goes along with

tackling a second language will allow me to continue to provide quality customer service as an in-store professional with Target and beyond.

Additionally, this project connected me with non-profit professionals and introduced me to a wide variety of service opportunities within and beyond CAC VITA, which will allow me to continue to volunteer in the Knoxville community after I graduate. Volunteering has for a long time been something that is both important to me and my values, so I am proud that this value is shared within Target's company culture as well. Because of this I will be able to volunteer within the Knoxville community as part of my professional career, and I will also be able to encourage those around me and connect them with the organizations and people I have gotten to meet as part of this project. Finally, and most importantly, beyond the personal and individual level, I will be able to connect Target, as a company, with these organizations to meet local needs.

Finally, through this capstone project, I discovered my passion and joy for positively impacting others, which I will continue to do as Executive Team Leader, Human Resources. In this role I will be able to bring joy, balance, encouragement, and equity to the workplace and hope to improve the overall job quality for my team members. It is through my time, skills, and experience gained at CAC VITA that I will be able to the best professional version of myself as a Human Resources executive and leader as I start my professional career after college.