

Looking for 'humane' leaders

by Joe Zavala of the Mail Tribune | Wednesday, March 10th 2021



*Hannah Brandt, Southern Oregon University accounting student, helps with budget work for the city of Phoenix on campus Monday.
<p>Jamie Lusch / Mail Tribune(/p)*



No, Hannah Brandt admits, she didn't really know what she was getting herself into when she signed up as an intern for the city of Phoenix.



A junior at Southern Oregon University, Brandt's long-term goal is to earn her certified public accountant license and land the sort of job for which CPAs are trained, managing money. But in Phoenix, the financial math major suddenly found herself crunching numbers for a city dealing with a crisis.

"So I stepped in and it has kind of gone down a couple different paths," Brandt said, "but mainly I've been helping with budgeting for next year, which has been really tricky because there's a lot of added expenses with the tragedy of the (Almeda) fire."



Though she may not have known it at the time, her internship turned out to provide exactly the kind of real-world experience Brandt had hoped for when she signed up for SOU's first-year Local Innovation Lab project, which is the product of a partnership between the school and the Humane Leadership Institute, a local education think tank.

Squeezing in a Zoom interview during a short work break, Brandt says she was interested in the program's pipeline to local businesses and organizations and its elevated approach to the typical books-to-degree-to-job collegiate path, which she believes can often be lacking in the transition department.

"That's definitely what initially intrigued me to do it, along with what they were promoting — helping with fire relief, because I consider the Rogue Valley my home now," said Brandt, who grew up in Eugene. "I've been here four years, and seeing everything that happened, if I could step in and help in some way, it was a two-for-one deal at that point."

Brandt is one of the first beneficiaries of Local Innovation Lab, a project borne from the 501c3 nonprofit Local Innovation Works, whose genesis can be traced back to a conversation between Humane Leadership Institute founder Stephen Sloan and Local Innovation Lab program director Ellen Holty. Last April, Sloan had just published his book "Humane Leadership: Tools to Engage, Empower, and Improve Performance" and had planned to go on a book tour down the West Coast. Then COVID-19 struck, which led to a heart-to-heart between Sloan and Holty.

"You just wrote a book about leadership, and our community needs leaders more than ever," Holty told Sloan. "What are you going to do, here, now?"



Sloan's answer was to host a series of conversations, inviting community members from all corners. Leaders in business and government, entrepreneurs and creative thinkers like Sloan gathered digitally during Thursday lunch hours to brainstorm, with an eye on COVID-19 relief efforts. As many as two dozen men and women participated in some of those conference calls last spring, and setting the tone from the beginning was Sloan's approach to humane leadership. That's a story in itself.

According to the epilogue of his book, the Humane Leadership Institute can be traced back to an encounter Sloan had with a young girl he spotted on the edge of a busy street in Mumbai. They made eye contact as the girl's mother sorted a pile of garbage nearby, and the look in her eyes ignited something in Sloan's heart.

"She is the one who invented humane leadership by planting a seed of compassion within me," Sloan writes in his book, which is available on Amazon. "That seed shattered the ideas that kept me from seeing other humans clearly and carefully. That seed continued to grow, sometimes uncomfortably, within me."

One of the people who sat in on Sloan's brainstorming sessions was Bret Anderson, the chair of SOU's economics department. Anderson said one idea that kept bubbling to the surface involved building bridges between SOU students looking for work experience and organizations dealing with the fallout from COVID-19.

"We had done a lot of the intellectual heavy lifting in terms of putting some curriculum together, so what we wanted to do was to build a program that wasn't just lining up interns with businesses," Anderson said. "We have those, and SOU does them pretty well. What we wanted was to create a program that helps tool up the next generation of leaders while they were interning and while they were participating in supporting these community organizations."



Using Sloan's book as a guide, the Local Innovation Lab program was developed over the summer. Students who apply for the internships must also take an SOU course on humane leadership and complete one of several elective courses that focus on equity, diversity and inclusion and "the wider social context in which entrepreneurship and civic engagement take place," to earn a digital badge or micro-credential in Values-Based Leadership, according to the university.

Holty expounded on the philosophy of the program. "Humane Leadership looks at the whole person — not just an authority figure, but a person with a body, a person with values and an individual in relationship with others," she said in an email about the program. "We look at our motivations, our mental models and our habits of mind and experiment with how changes to these things can improve our performance. We examine how we lead ourselves, so we can better understand how we can best lead our teams."

The program was supposed to launch in the winter term, but when the Alameda fire struck Sept. 8, Anderson said it became apparent that there was no time to waste.

"It wasn't just about the COVID disruption anymore," he said, "it was about other community organizations that were in need, whether it was housing solutions or if it was our migrant community members displaced by the fires. The need just expanded.

"We slowed down and we looked at the work we had done over the summer and we asked, 'Is our work still relevant?' And our answer was, yes, by a factor of 100 now."

Anderson and others at SOU went into overdrive to roll out the program in time for the second week of fall term, condensing a 10-week program into eight. When they put feelers out on message boards and hosted an informational Zoom session to weigh interest, 60 students logged in — a number that blew away Anderson.



According to Anderson, 19 students — 10 in the first cohort and nine this term — from more than 10 separate degree programs are receiving \$1,000 stipends to participate as interns in the new program this academic year. Those students have gained valuable experience, Anderson said, while also helping their local community recover from the one-two punch of COVID-19 and the Alameda fire. Three interns researched the city of Talent’s long-range plan, emergency declarations, local housing solution initiatives, grassroots organizations and potential buildable land sites. Another intern contacted local nonprofits and businesses and assessed whether they could create new jobs and expand their services with the help of interns.

And then there was Brandt, who said her internship with the city of Phoenix has been an eye-opener, and a godsend.

“Honestly, better than I even imagined,” she said. “I was excited to get experience in the field I want to go down, No. 1. And No. 2, just to be involved in the community has been amazing. I haven’t had that opportunity, especially with COVID and everything. It’s been a lot of being at home and not going and seeing anything. So getting to talk with people in the community and help out has been awesome and more than I could have asked for.”

Joe Zavala can be reached at 541-821-0829 or jzavala@rosebudmedia.com.

For more info, visit localinnovation.works