In association with Simon Fraser University & the Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute

ACTION for health

Applied Communication Technology: Information . Organizations . Networks

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FOR INTERNAL CIRCULATION	
FOR PUBLIC CIRCULATION	X

Presentation Outline- Work Undertaken

The Initiative on the New Economy (INE): Mobilizing knowledge and talent.

SSHRC forum, Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

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ACTION for Health

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Prepared by:
Casey McCarthy
Undergraduate Student
Simon Fraser University

Document Contact:

Ellen Balka
School of Communication
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6

tel: +1.604.725.2756
email: ellenb@sfu.ca
website: www.sfu.ca/act4hlth/

SFU Institutional Repository: http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/handle/1892/3701

Outline for Casey McCarthy's Congress 2007 Presentation:

Work undertaken

I am a fourth year undergraduate studying Communication at Simon Fraser University, as such, ACTION for Health has allowed me to do work usually reserved for graduate students.

A quick explanation of my individual project: ACTION for Health is collaborating with the BC Health Guide, a suite of health information services put together by the British Columbia Ministry of Health including a website, a handbook and a hotline, in order to find out how people use the web to find health information and if BCHealthguide.org is compatible with this. We did this by observing and later talking with three focus groups, one composed of youth, one of parents with children at home, and one of seniors.

For these we put together different health related scenarios for each group and asked the participants to find information related to them, first by searching the internet as they normally would, and later by using the BC Health Guide. After we finished observing the participants find the information, we had them answer questions about the process, first in questionnaires, followed by a discussion in a focus group.

The BC Health Guide project was first intended as a high level analysis meant to help improve the site for British Columbians, but I was soon asked to continue on analyzing the data we had collected. We felt like it would be fruitful as a more academic study. Since then, I have picked up and improved research skills, including, but not limited to: taking observer notes, consulting literature, coding data, visually representing data, writing in a research journal and using NVivo7, a type of qualitative data software, to organize and analyze data. Overall, I learned how to engage with the data and notice and express significant details and trends within it.

From the beginning, the BC Health Guide project has been my chance to learn by doing. It's been a lesson in solving problems both independently and taking direction from those with more experience than myself.

I have learned skills that could be used in a further research career, but are also applicable beyond academia. Meetings and presentations have improved my public speaking skills, chairing meetings has helped me manage time and become more assertive, and now I have experience traveling for work.

High points:

Something I enjoy about my job is the balance between freedom and responsibility, something not often trusted to undergrads. Being part of a team and taking on an inherited project means I must see my work as part of the bigger goals and objectives of this project while bringing in my own insights and style. This is something I take pride in.

One way I see the bigger picture is by helping with and observing how a research project is run and the struggles and triumphs associated with it. I have been given a good picture of what goes on in research – something I had to imagine before. So far, it's been a great way to try out a type of work I was interested in, but hadn't had the opportunity to try before. In addition to this, I have been able to apply concepts and skills from my work to my school work. I recently won a monetary award for a paper I wrote related to policy and technology.

That's what makes this valuable work experience: I can apply what I have learned here beyond the workplace. My own work, and seeing what my coworkers are doing, gives me tools to make important decisions related to my life path. As I finish my degree, I must make choices: when and where to further my education, what area to work in? I have made contacts with people who know what awaits me when I finish my degree. I think I have asked just about everyone on the project for advice in this way, and it makes me feel better about the next step.

Low points

My challenges relate to being an undergrad. Since this is not targeted towards undergrads, there has been a steep learning curve to adjust to and it would be wonderful if there were more for undergrads specifically, as a distinct group from graduate students and post-docs.

The biggest struggle is time. The fact that I must be a student while working for this project means I have to balance a schedule that guarantees I graduate at an appropriate time and get in the classes I want and need, but it also means I want to stay a student long enough to work here and get the most out of my research project.

In conclusion, my experience shows how much undergrads stand to gain from this kind of work. I am certain that considering changes that would open up more opportunities for undergrads to work as research assistants on these projects would be very worthwhile for everyone involved.