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Alpha Sigma Scholarship Reflection

This summer, I had the privilege of traveling out to Palo Alto, California to work on a startup called The Hive. The Hive is a social messaging app designed for friends to share content from across the internet in private groups. While the two-plus month internship was cut short in light of all that is currently happening, I was still able to develop some skills, immerse myself more fully in the project, strengthen some relationships, and learn some important lessons. It was a professionally and personally enhancing experience, and I'm thankful to the committee for helping make it happen.

Beginnings of The Hive

I started working for The Hive in January 2020, through the connection of brother Denny Cmiel. Back then, it was an app for aggregating all of the sports articles for particular teams. That was going well until mid-march, when all sports stopped. We thought that was a good time to explore content aggregation in some other areas outside of sports, something we planned to do eventually after we did sports well. We started aggregating Coronavirus news for a few months, before we realized the bigger opportunity was in content curation, rather than aggregation. For the next month we contacted experts and influencers in certain domains to see if they'd be interested in using a product designated for curating content (articles, Tweets, YouTube videos, etc.) so their followers are only seeing that of the highest caliber. Finally, although this recruitment of content curators was going well, the decision was made to focus on content sharing among groups of friends, which was supposed to be a feature of this larger product we were currently working on. I was a little confused about why we decided to make this change

when the project seemed to be going well, but since most social media is moving towards private group interactions with an emphasis on privacy, this idea seemed more compelling to our CEO.

After that decision, we devoted our full effort towards creating an app where groups of friends will share the content they find online with each other. Instead of sharing a Tweet they enjoyed with people over direct messages on Twitter or sending it to a group text, The Hive creates a central place to share all of that content. People often lament that sharing a piece of content disrupts conversation flow, or that your message is ignored because people in the group chat are distracted by other things, and do not give the content you shared adequate attention. By separating the act of content sharing from text messaging, you can solve these frustrations and add features that make the experience even more enjoyable, and so our work for the summer began...

A Change of Plans

I was supposed to road trip out to California with Denny, when school ended, and stay there until August, but I ended up taking a $\frac{2}{3}$ capacity plane ride to get there instead. I also only stayed for the month of June instead of the planned two and a half months. We were also planning on getting the full Silicon Valley experience while we were out there, starting the summer with a 10-day meditation retreat, then starting each morning with yoga and a short meditation, and changing to a vegan diet for the whole summer. The meditation retreat ended up getting cancelled, and it's safe to say we could have done better our mindfulness rituals, but it was still fun to try to put ourselves in that mindset.

When I initially ventured to the west coast, we were expecting our office space, the Pear accelerator program, to open in mid-June. As it changed to being fully online, it didn't make

sense for us to stay out there and pay exorbitant rent and work from our dining room table.

However, in the month of June and working remotely in July, I was able to throw myself into some pretty exciting work.

Work.

My work responsibilities for the summer were in the realm of user experience research. The goal of this work is to get into the mind of the user through user behavior interviews and usability tests so we can understand how our users interact with the product. These findings inform our decision-making process for product direction and features. I ran many A/B tests, which is where one variable in the product is manipulated for half of all users. By comparing that group with the control, we can see what effect that change has made. Towards the end of the summer, I had the opportunity to think through and design some of the fun social features we're planning to add to the app when we hire more developers to their team. We also launched on the App Store at the end of the summer and I spent time recruiting new users to use the app. I have picked up many user research skills, which is the area I'd like to work in out of college, so it has been a great summer for working towards that aim.

It was extremely helpful to work on such a small team. The team consisted of Tyler (CEO and founder), Jess (Marketing), Denny (Product Management), a designer, a few developers, and me. I was able to collaborate with every team member and contribute to decisions being made. I was also able to see the thought process behind how each decision was made, which made the work I was doing make more sense. I always felt connected to the company vision because we would sit down as a team for daily meetings and talk everything through. It really helped me hone my skills in an area I had a lot of interest in, but did not have

much practice. I now feel comfortable conducting user research for any product after what I learned this summer.

Travel

Denny, Luke and I were able to take trips to Big Sur, San Francisco, and Yosemite on the weekends. With most things closed down, it was the perfect situation to spend time in the beautiful California outdoors. California truly has some spectacular natural wonders. I can't think of a more serene setting than sitting under a waterfall, looking out over Yosemite Valley. Travelling with people is a great way to get to know them better. On top of sharing whatever adventures you go on together, you figure out what excites them, what they fear, what their general attitudes towards things that don't come up in the everyday routine are. I walked away from the summer being even closer with Luke and Denny, two of my already very good friends.

Lessons Learned

I have learned new things during each summer throughout high school and college, from lifeguarding, to traveling to Europe, to taking an EMT class, but this summer seemed to teach me some especially valuable lessons. Through the work, I learned more about the importance of responsibility, ownership, and reliability. Being on such a small team, if you're trusted to do something and you don't follow through, it drags the whole team backwards. It's important to take responsibility for something, do it well, and drive the whole team forward. Living in a house is a lot different than living in the Lodge, too. Cooking and cleaning for yourself humbles you, and makes you take ownership of your environment and your health. You're responsible for your entertainment and spending your time wisely.

The change to online work helped me see Parkinson's Law, that work expands to time allotted, in action. Without setting concrete hours for myself, it was easy to let work seep well into the night because it was easy to stay close to my phone and computer all day. I quickly realized the importance of allotting time for work and time for leisure, and to give each my full attention during their allotted time. It was also helpful for me to develop a morning routine to stay disciplined and sane while staying in the same room all day for most of the summer.

I was a little disappointed when we shifted gears from the content curation product to the private groups app, but I came across a Jeff Bezos quote that helped me out. His advice to his team while they are making a decision is “disagree and commit,” meaning that the whole team doesn't have to agree with the decision that's made, but everyone should commit if it has any chance of success. It's a good phrase for many things outside of work too. Not everything will go my way, but if I don't commit and instead wallow in self-pity, then nothing is going to get better for me and I'll drag everything around me down too.

Deeper Lessons

I also learned some more difficult, but more important, expectation shattering lessons this summer. Living in California helped me realize what I want and don't want out of life. Sure, it would be cool to live in California and drive a Tesla, but that sure won't bring me fulfillment. In my head, Silicon Valley was the Mecca of innovation and excitement, and if I wasn't there I was nowhere. But after being out there and experiencing it, and seeing how work is changing to a virtual space, I realize there is more than one path to take. Along the lines of my career choice, I went into user research because it fascinated me, but part of that fascination has turned into trepidation. It is fun to get inside the head of the user and make your app better with that

knowledge, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life figuring out ways to addict people to their apps. This summer made me more cautious about how I spend my time on my phone, limiting it to strictly direct communication. Technology, especially social media, is a powerful force. It has the potential for great things, but also could be disastrous for our mental health and social cohesion if used incorrectly. I want to make sure I'm on the right side of that fight in the future. These things helped me get a healthy dose of reality. It's always better to experience something, assess what you liked about it and move forward from there than live in the fantasy in your head.

Nonetheless, during a summer where many people's plans got ruined, I was fortunate enough to still have a productive experience. It helped me develop work skills, contribute to a product that may be used and loved by many people, strengthen my relationships with coworkers and friends, and grasp the meaning of crucial life lessons through experience. I'm excited to continue to work on projects with people in the Lodge and keep building new things.

Link to The Hive website if you'd like to learn more about the app: <https://www.jointhehive.app/>



Me at Facebook's Headquarters



Tyler, a student in Stanford's MBA program, took us on a tour of the campus



Yosemite National Park



Our house and workspace



Luke, Denny, myself, Sasha Seymore, Landry, and Tyler at our send-off party. Sasha is a former UNC grad and Tyler's roommate. He's the founder of a company called Learn to Win, where Luke and Landry worked this summer.



San Francisco



The four of us in front of our house on the last night



Weekend trip the Big Sur



Luke and me at Glacier Point in Yosemite