

Internship Program at Mercer

Changing Lives through Service to Nature

Student Conservation Association

In 1955, Elizabeth Titus Cushman, a senior at Vassar College, submitted a thesis that requested, “. . . a Student Conservation Corps be implemented.” Within two years of Elizabeth’s request, the nonprofit organization Student Conservation Association (SCA) was created and programs at Grand Teton National Park and Olympic National Park were formed. Since then, more than 3,000 people nationwide work each year on summer trail crews or as SCA conservation interns.



Carla Hara is Mercer's current SCA intern.

“Changing Lives through Service to Nature” is the motto for the SCA, which has a long history of service in the Houston metropolitan area. With the help of local donors, the SCA has placed interns at various public parks and private conservation organizations throughout the U.S.

Former SCA Interns

In spring 2006, The Mercer Society helped fund Mercer’s first part-time SCA intern to assist with Mercer’s botany and conservation programs. Vietnam native Thy Cao interned for 18 weeks while pursuing her bachelor of science degree in biochemistry at the University of Houston. Thy crafted garden signs, prepared protocols for the garden sign machine, assisted the Adopt-A-Trail groups with invasive plant removal at Mercer, and prepared seed for Mercer’s Center for Plant Conservation (CPC) seed bank. Thy worked in the Endangered Species Garden each day, the rare native plant conservation nursery, and trained with David Berkshire’s native plant propagation team. Interns are taught to use taxonomic keys and assist Mercer’s volunteer herbarium managers, Mary Helen Pritchett and David Berkshire. As a SCA host institution, Mercer is encouraged to include interns in educational conferences, seminars, and field trips. During 2006, Thy and I, along with other Harris County summer interns, toured the green building facilities and Environmental Learning Center at Sheldon Lake State Park. Thy is currently pursuing graduate studies in biochemistry.

Due to the success of Mercer’s first SCA internship, the SCA’s Houston Conservation Collaborative provided funding for an additional 12-week full-time internship during the fall of 2007.

Travis Schoneman, who earned his bachelor of science degree in biology and a minor in Chinese Studies from the University of Houston, arrived in September 2007 in time to attend the annual Texas Plant Conservation Conference at Lady Bird Johnston Wildflower Center in Austin. In addition to the duties Thy performed during her

internship, Travis conducted field surveys and collections with botanists from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) for the CPC and Millennium Seed Bank Project. Travis prepared ginger specimens collected by Mercer volunteer Ceil Dow and other ginger team members for Mercer's North American Plant Collections Consortium (ginger documentation) project. During his service at Mercer, Travis earned a \$1,000 grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service. This grant, established in 1993, helps give Americans opportunities to improve communities through service. Travis has an interest in graduate studies in Asian ethnobotany, and plans to move abroad this summer to teach English in Taipei, Taiwan.

Mercer's New SCA Intern

Once again, due to the success of Travis' internship at Mercer, the SCA's Houston Conservation Collaborative granted funding for an additional botany and conservation intern position at Mercer for winter 2008. SCA intern, Carla Hara, who earned a bachelor of science degree in biology from Humboldt State University, CA, will spend 11 weeks at Mercer. Carla began her internship by attending the TPWD Diversity Conference at the Houston Zoo January 17 through 19. Carla helped Mercer volunteers Harold Kron, Ed Dolphin, and Dona Curren of the Heartwood Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist Program, and Dennis Samoska and Judy Banning of Mercer's native plant team spruce up the Endangered Species Garden in preparation for a pre-conference tour for several TPWD, CPC, and TxDOT conservation botanists attending the diversity conference.

Carla has already begun to compile a detailed report of Mercer's seed collection data for the CPC and TPWD. Once the report is complete, duplicate seeds from Mercer's rare native plant seed bank will be transferred to the national seed storage lab in Ft. Collins, CO. Carla's report will be referenced when seeking additional funding from the CPC for the four botanical institutions that are certified to bank Texas plants. These institutions are: Mercer, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, San Antonio Botanical Garden, and Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix. Carla is also crafting new signs for over 60 of the plants displayed in the Herb Garden. These signs will include the names of the plants in Braille for Mercer's sight-impaired visitors.

Mercer thanks everyone who has helped make the SCA program a success. A special thanks to Justin Chow, the SCA Diversity Program representative from the regional office in Arlington, VA. Justin has been a huge asset in placing and assisting interns at Mercer.

Stop by the staff building to welcome Carla Hara, Mercer's current SCA intern! We know she will welcome a break from her busy schedule!

Anita Tiller, Botanist & Conservation Manager