

Benjamin Hall

CPRE 494

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Cumulative Reflection

As a freshman in college, I had an experience unbeknownst to any college student before me: the COVID-19 outbreak. All the traditional college life aesthetics and ideas that had been advertised and shown off to me previously were thrown out the window. No campus life, no going out with friends, no in-person classes; it was a bizarre experience that loosely formed my freshman years. Days went by in my dorm, only getting out of bed to get to my laptop to view my online classes. It was a rather monotonous time and the days truly just felt like they rushed by. However, I feel like that experience gave me a new appreciation of the social life that college offers that most don't gain until their thirties. During my freshman year, I wasn't really pushed or (understandably) encouraged to seek new social and educational experiences in academics or extracurricular clubs. It wasn't until really my junior year I really started to seek new experiences in college and get the true "college" experience.

Working on group projects at Iowa state helped me improve both my collaboration skills and leadership skills. Unlike Highschool with group projects that had relatively low technical details, the group projects that I had to complete in college were highly technical, often requiring a lot of specialization in each branch of the project. For example, in COM S 309 we had to divvy up roles between the front end for both the UI portion of our app, and the game portion. The same had to be done with our backend. With such high specialization, it became critical that there was strong collaboration and a strong leader to coordinate between these sections. We had to develop strong designs as a group to make sure our individual aspects of the project would

interconnect properly at the end. It also required persistent check-ins to check for compatibility and make any changes to our complex design if need-be. It taught me a lot of lessons in how to manage small teams in these environments. I would not have been able to grow as much if my team was not such a group of excellent people that were motivated to develop something great. Their motivation also motivated me to seek out more and more information to make our project better, independent of any class material. I truly learned a lot of valuable technical information during that project that I never would've had the opportunity to in any traditional lecture-based courses.

While that was an example of a well-oiled machine for group projects, I unfortunately experienced a few obstacles in some of my other groups. One example that comes to mind was the group I joined for the Cyber Defense Competition (CDC). It was my first year and I knew the basics of the competition, setting up servers and machines, securing them against malicious actors, and then having to actively defend them in real-time. However, I joined a rather ill-prepared team. It had come to the last few days before the competition and my (rather inexperienced) teammates had not prepared any of the servers. I had spent the next few days teaching them and organizing them all to learn how to set up and secure each machine, trying to not handhold them too much in the process so they could grasp the strings for the competition later. This experience gave me valuable insight on coming back from setbacks and also coaching individuals and teams on difficult and complex topics.

One of my most difficult times at Iowa State was the course COMS 311. Coming into coding classes, I found myself having a bit of an ego when it came to coding. I had been coding since I was around 10, making websites or mods for Minecraft. I thought I knew almost everything when it came to topics taught in the courses. However, this ego came to hurt me and also

challenge my beliefs when it came to COMS 311. Before taking this course, I never really sought out to change my study habits or seek external assistance from the professors or other sources. I soon came to realize that I definitely needed help in this class. Frankly, I bombed the first exam and it gave me a reality check that I needed to do something. After this, I tried peer teaching, going to recitations, and changing up my study habits. It opened my eyes to how closed off I had been on how I studied and simply did courses at Iowa State. These learning opportunities truly helped me comprehend the material much better and also introduced me to new friends in my class to discuss and understand the content more. From my classes, I've gotten to meet a vast array of individuals from varying cultures and backgrounds. From then, I've come to realize the benefits of seeking out help that I've struggled with prior to COMS 311.

Overall my time at Iowa State has been a wild ride that started rough and slow with COVID, but also rapidly ended with these last few years. I've got to experience a vast array of experiences, from good group projects to bad, to having to redefine my practices when I encountered new struggles, and meeting new friends that opened my eyes culturally and socially.