

KAELA WIERENGA

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Welcome

Hello! My name is Kaela Wierenga and I am graduating from Minnesota State University-Mankato in the Spring of 2023 with a major in Zoology.

Mission Statement

To go through every day finding something exciting or new in my life and to learn from everything. Enjoying the little things every day will create a bigger impact on my future and how I grow as a person. I strive towards my goals so I can become someone who the younger me would look up to.

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I was born and raised in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The reason I came to Minnesota State University-Mankato is that I enjoyed how the campus felt small, but everything happening is on a larger scale. I was also drawn in at the fact they had Zoology for a major since no schools in South Dakota offer that as a major.

Outside of school I enjoy spending time with my family and friends, traveling, volunteering, going kayaking, taking pictures (mostly of animals, go figure), axe throwing, taking walks outdoors, and viewing animals no matter where I go.

Hover over the images for a description of the picture.





Honors Program

The Honors Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato is committed to supporting motivated undergraduate students by providing them with exceptional learning opportunities, mentoring relationships, and a supportive community that fosters their personal, academic, and professional development.

Leadership

Research, Scholarly,
and Creative Acitivity

Intercultural
Engagement

Honors 375 "Why Honors?" Essay

In the spring of 2022, I took Honors 375 which is a portfolio development class. We were tasked with writing why we joined honors and why we continue to be in honors.

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Kaela Wierenga
Honors Portfolio
Why Honors 375
Major: Zoology

My Why Honors Essay

I am going to be honest; I am not entirely sure why I am in honors. I have always heard that honors programs in college are good and difficult to get into, so when I was offered to apply,

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Honors 475 "Why Honors?" Essay

In the spring of 2023, I took Honors 475 which is a portfolio capstone class. We were tasked with writing why we joined honors and why we continue to be in honors and compare it to what we originally wrote in Honors 375.

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Kaela Wierenga
Honors Portfolio
Why Honors 475
Major: Zoology

My Why Honors Essay

Honors has helped me to look differently at college. To me, college is just a few years I must do for me to be allowed to get experiences in animal care. When applying for internships,

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My Experiences with Leadership

I think everyone was told growing up that being a leader is important. You get told being a leader is a good thing and you should do it, but nobody ever really provides you with resources or opportunities to grow as a leader. Sure, there are a few things you can do in high school such as becoming a leader in a club, but it can often be difficult for people who are a bit more introverted like myself. Of course, I want to grow my leadership experience, it is a valuable skill to have, but having that courage at times to take that big step up can be difficult. What I really appreciate about college is how diverse and open it is, it makes taking those steps less stressful and finding the opportunities that fit you much easier.

One of the biggest things I learned in both my **learning community** and **MavPASS** is people come from many diverse backgrounds. I already felt out of my element because most people that attend college here at Minnesota State are from Minnesota whereas I am from South Dakota. It took an adjustment period to understand that what I considered normal maybe was not everyone's normal. Part of being a leader is being able to take all these differences and find the balance where it fits everyone's personalities and experiences which often turns out to be the best, most unique, and creative outcome. While we did not do projects in my learning community, we still participated in classes and research together. In MavPASS I collaborated with other leaders and students in the class I was assisting. Allowing everyone to add in their personal touch makes the environment more comfortable and allows the opportunity for everyone to be leaders.

I like to joke and say I have no off days, and that is quite true. The **Strengths Finder test** said I was an achiever meaning I like to accomplish something tangible every day. I am not going to lie; I do this. Even on the weekends when I do not have homework or am scheduled to work at my job, I am usually cleaning around my apartment, doing laundry, running errands, or doing projects I have not had time to do earlier. While it may seem like I cannot relax, I find this a good skill for a leader to have, always striving to push forward and accomplish something even if it simple or small. Being a leader does not mean you have to accomplish something for others every day, accomplishing things for oneself is highly important for personal growth to be a better leader to others.

The biggest challenge I have faced and continue to face is speaking up. When there are already so many leaders around you who are comfortable and willing to speak up, it can be intimidating to want to join. What if you say something stupid? What if you say something irrelevant? What if you try to make a joke that does not go over well? I know this is a common challenge, but it is something you must face personally. Encouragement from others is helpful, but they cannot be the ones speaking up for you, it is something you must figure out how to do. The best way I have learned to counter this and get more comfortable is to put myself into more situations where I need to speak up, where I need to step up. Classes have been my best way since you are in a space where trial and error is to be expected when learning, so saying something incorrectly is not the end of the world and is something you can easily correct as you learn more in class and can have more confident answers.

As I continue into my career, I want to continue to be a leader and grow my skills. I know I am comfortable with most animals, but I will be interacting with lots of people. I need to continue to go outside of my comfort zones and take that step to be more vocal and be a leader. I know the information I am presenting when interpreting an exhibit, all I need to do is be confident in myself.

Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activity

My Experiences with Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activity

In all honesty, my research experience has not been traditional at all. Since myself and my career are unique, I kind of expected this. Just as every animal is unique, every experience I have gained is unique. I will say I had a traditional start, but from there, research focused on my special passion and career.

It may seem odd to include a simple **research project from a 100-level class**, but it really was an important start for me in terms of understanding the complexities of personal research. Schools always teach how to obtain secondary research using a database, but they rarely ever have you conduct primary research. This was the first time in my life that I had to conduct primary research by myself. It is not too difficult to create a survey with all the programs that exist, but there were struggles. The challenge is creating and wording the questions in such a way that your audience will understand, and you will get responses that fit what you are questioning. The next difficult part is getting your survey out there. Getting a wide variety of responses was difficult, thankfully, I at least got six responses that I could use. After all these challenges of primary research, you still must assemble your results in a way that can be understood and present your research effectively. Synthesizing and organizing all this information was important to properly convey my message and let me gain experience in such a key task.

While **RISEbio** was primary research, it was in a different format than creating and distributing a survey. Performing research in a proper lab and getting tangible results was something completely new. I learned all these techniques, protocols, and how to use machines to see something that is not even visible to the human eye, crazy. I was conducting research that little was known about, working on projects that no one has ever worked on, all while I was a first-year college student. This was a big step considering I knew nothing about microbiology or the techniques we would be using. Research like this is generally conducted by professors and their graduate students, not undergraduate students adapting to college during a pandemic. These new experiences and learning how a real lab operates may seem like the opposite of what I want to do in life, but they were important. While I may not be working in a lab, many tests done for the care of animals are done in a lab by veterinarian staff. Understanding how these tests are run betters my knowledge and my ability to explain it to others.

This is the part where my research becomes untraditional, internships. Although internships are normal, not many people do internships at zoos. As I started at each zoo, I learned about how each place takes care of their animals, learned the routines, and interacted with the animals. I am lucky to have done two internships at two very distinct zoos. During **my first internship**, there was so much information to absorb about all aspects of a zoo. As I progressed through **my second internship**, I continued to learn about zoos, but from a different perspective, given I was working with larger animals in a much larger zoo. While there were obvious differences, there were still many similarities that are useful knowledge and can better my chances of getting a job at a zoo in the future.

One of the biggest challenges throughout all my research experiences has been trying to learn while figuring out how to apply the information in other contexts. It has gotten easier since I have started to gain more experience in animal care and interacting with guests. I have learned to provide information in a variety of ways to give the best experience. As I get more comfortable with the animals, organization, and information, the better able I am to confidently present in front of guests.

As I continue into my career, I wish to take all that I have learned in my diverse and untraditional learning path and continue to apply it. Not only will this be beneficial to me, it will be beneficial to those that I work with, showing just how amazing animal care and conservation can be.



Intercultural Engagement

My Experiences with Intercultural Engagement

Completing this competency was difficult for me, mostly because it made me feel uncomfortable to look for experiences. I like to use the word uncomfortable to explain my experiences, but not in a negative sense, more so to explain how I was thinking outside of what I knew, allowing for personal growth which can be uncomfortable at times. I am from South Dakota which may not explain it very well, but intercultural things were just not common. I am from Sioux Falls which is the biggest city in South Dakota which has impacted my view of the world. As the town has grown over my lifetime, I have seen more inclusivity and events I would have never seen before. My high school also strived to be inclusive and present natural history that is often forgotten. We had a Native American Heritage week where we would learn about different Native American tribes and their cultures and traditions. While I found this as intercultural and thought I had a good understanding and would be prepared for college, I was not. It may not seem like it, but Minnesota is culturally different than South Dakota, hence why this competency was so uncomfortable for me. I thought I understood intercultural engagement, but I did not.

During my first semester while taking Honors 201, I was introduced to the idea of being a **language learner partner**. Honestly, I think I was initially drawn into doing this experience purely to get an experience for the intercultural engagement competency. Now that I have completed the experience, I can say it did so much more for me than just that. I got to hang out with people from South Korea, learn about their lives and their culture, and they got to learn about me and life in The United States, all because I filled out an interest form. I still look back on all the fun I had learning differences between our versions of normal and suggesting different things for us to do. Korean BBQ? Delicious suggestion they made. Why are there so many fast-food places? It is America was the best reason I could give. However, they did enjoy Culvers, so my confusing answer at least provided good food. What still makes me laugh to this day is the hours I spent with them trying to teach them how to pronounce Adam Thielen's last name.

Sure, this put me out of my comfort zone since I am not the most social person, and I was spending time learning about how my normal life is not so normal everywhere. What really made me feel awkward was attending the **Maverick Diversity Institute (MDI) Passport Program**. I was exposing myself to new people, ideas, cultures, all with which I was unfamiliar. The topics presented at each session were meant to make you personally reflect on how these broad topics were in your day to day, and you just did not know it. There are places where in which it will be easy for me to interact, but there are places that are going to take work for me to understand how I want to interact. It is easy when I am around my friends and family, but it is difficult when trying a new restaurant. While the work may seem discomfoting or feel like I do not have control, these experiences can be beneficial to helping me see people and cultures I had no idea existed. This stuff should make you uncomfortable because you are unfamiliar with it, that is where the growth begins.

While one of my experiences was a fun hang out and the other was more serious reflection sessions, I truly learned a lot from each. My perspective on intercultural things has grown greatly in the three years I lived in Minnesota. I knew the world was big, but now I have learned about it, experienced it, it is unlike anything I could have learned on my own. Not only are the animals I want to work with from all around the world, so are the people with whom I will interact. Animals are a great way to bring people together and zoos and aquariums are a great place to go when traveling. I hope in the future that I will get to attend more uncomfortable experiences that allow me to grow interculturally and be a better person in the world.

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Contact Me

Got questions? Random thoughts? Just want to say hi? Contact me here!

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