- What is your major?

Biology.

- What are your academic goals?

I plan to study entomology or biology at a four-year institution once I transfer out, since I love working with insects and their leggy relatives. My long-term goal is to earn a Ph. D and conduct research in arthropod evolution or biophysics. I also would like to continue my music education as I dive deeper into academia.

- Please give brief description of internship and award.

I was selected to be a part of the 2023 Harvard University Genes, Ecosystems, and Organisms Research Experience for Undergraduates. Included is a $6,000 stipend, along with a food allowance, free travel, free housing, and a fully supported visit to the Leadership Alliance National Symposium in Hartford, Connecticut. I will be working with Dr. Gonzalo Giribet's lab at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and am honored to have the opportunity to contribute to their research regarding arthropod evolution.

- When did you start looking for and applying for internships for Summer 2023?

I started writing applications as soon as the Fall Semester ended, but I had already compiled a list of internships the summer before.

- How did you find your internship?

I mainly Googled "biology REU" and "insect REU" and kept scrolling, but the NSF ETAP website has a bunch of opportunities compiled (and you need to use it to apply to a good portion of internships as well, so it's doubly useful). You can also search up your target or dream school and type in "your intended subject" with "REU" or "summer internship" and you can find some cool opportunities that way as well.

- What types of documents were required (i.e. personal statement, letter(s) of recommendation, etc.)

Most required a personal statement essay, two letters of recommendation, a resume, and maybe some supplementary questions, along with basic things such as demographics, GPA, veteran status, etc. Some programs were a lot more demanding than others in this regard; it's very similar to college applications.

- How much time do you think you put into preparing everything for your application?

All of Winter Intersession and the first month being back at school. Refining my essays took a couple hours a day minimum.

- Were there any resources you used that were helpful (i.e. writing center for help writing personal statement)?

I reached out to a mentor of mine during break, and he helped me substantially in formulating my essay topics. I would also like to give a shoutout to Dr. Trujillo, my ENG203 professor, since she helped me make a huge last-minute change to my personal statements. Without them, I probably would have gotten rejected from every program I applied to.

- What do you feel were successful features of your application?

My essay was the strongest feature of my application. I put a lot of effort into fleshing out a cohesive, genuine narrative that suited not only the needs of the programs I applied to, but also made sure to emphasize that my participation would prove to be mutually beneficial.

- What do you feel may have helped you stand out from other applicants (i.e. extra curricular activities, background, etc.)?

Although my grades aren't stellar, I have a passion for studying insects that started from childhood. I did a data collecting gig for an out-of-state systematics laboratory and started volunteering at a laboratory at SDSU during my last year of high school. Since there aren't many opportunities to join a laboratory and conduct research at community colleges, my involvement and initiative to seek out these opportunities without them being immediately available/present probably played a factor in my acceptance. Tangibly speaking, I actually talked to the organizer of the Harvard GEO program after I got accepted, and she said that my essay was very similar to successful graduate school applications on the merit of my huge obsession with insects.

- What would you recommend to other students to help themselves stand out?

Work on your essay as much as possible, you want to make sure that your story is compelling enough to show your passion for something and that you can offer something to the program. Trim down as much fluff as you can, and make sure every sentence is deliberate. Also, make sure you have one or a few trusted mentors who can look over your essays to help you revise your work.

As a community college student, you don't have the same easy access to laboratories and on-campus research opportunities as students who can afford to go to four-year institutions. You'll have to make those opportunities yourself. Reach out to labs in and out of state, show your interest, and don't feel bad if 5, 10, or even 50 labs ignore or decline you. If you can just get one laboratory who can support your journey into research, you've succeeded.

- Any helpful tips you want to add (i.e. start looking for internships and preparing documents early)?

Compile your list during the summer, or now, if you have the time. The most important thing to consider when making your list is fit. Do these professors do research you want to do later in your career? Look into some articles they have published. To a lesser extent, choose a program where you want to transfer to or go to for graduate school, since you could build connections on your way in and out. Fit is more important than what school you intern at since you should enjoy what you do, and more popular schools tend to be more competitive (though all of these internships are quite competitive, on average, there are about 200-450 applicants per program, with only 10-25 being accepted to each program). Most of all, shoot for the stars! I never thought I could even get into any of the 8 internships I applied to, let alone my top pick at Harvard. Don't be afraid to reach as high as you can.