

Early inspiration and STEM opportunities help shape future for CWI undergraduate



Cayden Whipkey of College of Western Idaho gathering GPS points with survey equipment.

Cayden Whipkey, an undergraduate student from College of Western Idaho (CWI), majoring in Biology with an emphasis in Natural Resources, was born and raised in Nampa, ID. Cayden's experiences growing up in the Treasure Valley helped shape his current career aspirations early on. Cayden states, "when I was younger my father used to take me on hikes all up and down southern Idaho. Unfortunately, he passed away when I was young, but he was and remains a great inspiration to me."

He got an Information Technology job early on and worked there for a few years, but his passion for the outdoors began to take over. Cayden recalls, "I wanted a change in my life from an office-life-future. I decided to quit, as I was tired of staring out the window at the mountains instead of being outside."

Plans to go on to college began to materialize for Cayden, and he decided to go in a new direction. "If you had asked me before then I would've said that I never would go to college, especially as I did poorly in my previous schooling. I took a leap though, and decided to enroll in higher education at CWI and have been making a point to achieve as much as I can since then."

Research opportunities helped pave the way for Cayden to gain hands-on learning and to network with other students and researchers in his field. In the Spring of 2022, Cayden heard about the Idaho NSF EPSCoR Student Authentic Research Experiences (SARE) program through his advisor, Lindsey Zahller, at CWI, and he decided to apply. During the summer of 2022, he worked under the mentorship of Trevor Caughlin on a SARE project focused on *"Investigating the relationship between sagebrush recruitment and early-spring snow patterns."*

In his SARE research, Cayden's work focused on using drone imagery and machine learning to predict which sagebrush plants would flower, which allowed him to do GIS remote sensing work. He also worked with other students and other mentors in the field that helped him to grow his skill-set and network. Cayden notes, "all of these folks were very eager to share their information and passion for their work."

Following his summer SARE research experience, he found out that he could continue working with the Caughlin lab during the semester through the VIP program, so he did just that. The VIP program offers students real-world experience while they earn course credits over multiple semesters working alongside faculty.

His SARE and VIP experiences have helped shape his career aspirations as well. Upon graduating from CWI, Cayden plans on attending the University of Idaho to pursue a four-year degree and then on to graduate school. After graduate school, he also hopes to have a career with the USDA and plans to continue to pursue as many outdoor related opportunities as possible. "I want to keep myself learning in the real world with real experiences," notes Cayden, "I learn best through doing the work and seeing how systems and ideas work in practice."

To learn more about Cayden's research visit the Idaho GEM3 Student Research Map found at:
www.idahoepscor.org/student-research-map



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