

DOMINIQUE GARCIA



Making Her Way in a World of Water

This student's passion for the environment led to a sudden change of career plan - and she hasn't looked back since.

Story written by Mark Cox

For many people, work is a vocation. But for Environmental Science student Dominique Garcia, her career choice actually came more as a revelation.

A couple of years ago, Garcia was studying for an Early Childhood Education major when she was asked to write an English paper on plastic pollution – and it was like a light suddenly switched on.

“It turned my whole world upside down,” she recalled. “I could no longer think about anything other than the environment, and how we affect it.”

Garcia signed up for a [Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Science at MSU Denver](#), from which she graduated late last year. And since making the change, she hasn’t looked back for a moment.

“What appeals to me most about this subject is the hands-on learning,” she said. “Almost everything about this type of science is interactive and I love that.”

Lake sampling

Garcia’s degree has involved a lot of serious study time – but she hasn’t just been stuck in a classroom these past two years. Her program was specifically designed to make sure students have real-world opportunities to pick up valuable experience and burnish their scientific skills.



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That’s why, alongside her studies, Garcia just spent a rewarding year as a student intern with Barr Lake & Milton Reservoir Watershed Association.

This opportunity was made possible by the National Science Foundation’s [ASCEND Engine](#), which has been a workforce-development partner to MSU Denver for the past two years.

The ASCEND Engine supports students who are studying in priority areas centered on resiliency, sustainability and climate tech innovations. Its support has enabled scores of MSU Denver students - including Garcia - to access incredible student internship opportunities with a broad range of pioneering agencies and companies.

“My main role with the Watershed Association was to help with routine water sampling and monitoring at both Barr Lake and Milton Reservoir,” Garcia recalled. “It was great because I learned how to use all their advanced equipment to gather samples, and those were exactly the skills I needed.”



The other aspect of the internship role was outreach, and Garcia was always enthusiastic when it came to spreading the word about the Watershed Association’s good work. She prided herself on seeing to every detail - handing out flyers at events, building ‘education stations’ at the local Visitor Center and even overseeing public zooplankton displays under a microscope.

“Dominique was a great fit for us,” said Sami Miller, Watershed Coordinator at the Association. “Not only did she gain lots of direct experience in sampling lakes, streams and ditches; she was also very comfortable with the outreach side of things and working with the public.”

Numerous duties

For organizations, one of the main joys of hosting an internship is seeing first-hand how the experience bolsters and reinforces a student's classroom studies. Over the course of the past year, Miller saw Garcia's confidence and abilities grow significantly.

"We regularly sent Dominique out on a boat to collect lake samples and observe reservoir water quality conditions, and she quickly became comfortable out there," she said.

She also proved adept at handling whatever challenges were thrown her way: "Whatever we asked her to do - whether that was collecting multiple depth samples, carrying out fish surveys, or identifying phytoplankton and zooplankton - she was right on it."



Miller was especially pleased to see that the internship seemed to confirm Garcia's passion for water education and her choice of career. Garcia agreed: "The whole experience helped me to decide that this really is something I definitely want to do - and I think that's the whole point of an internship." w

New connections

Garcia was happy to find numerous perks with her internship. "Getting so much hands-on experience with the equipment and learning the overall techniques for sampling water in a reservoir was fantastic," she said. "Plus, I got to be outside almost every day, which I really enjoyed,"

Perhaps more than anything, though, Garcia was able to leverage the internship to make new connections and meet more people in the field of water.

Her busy networking quickly notched a positive result, in fact, when she was offered a temporary, full-time position with Colorado Parks and

Wildlife, which lasted all through last summer.

“I had a big responsibility – namely, helping monitor toxic algal blooms across all recreational waters in the state,” she explained. “But it was so much fun, and getting to see everything under a very high-resolution microscope was a fascinating experience.”

Tough subject

As Garcia’s college journey hits the home strait, she has advice for those who might consider following her lead by taking the same MSU Denver degree.

“Be ready for a challenge because this is a tough subject,” she said. “But if you’re passionate about creating change and helping others, then go for it.”

Garcia cites her supportive professors, friendly college environment and the course itself as the main factors behind her own ‘great experience’ at MSU Denver. “I have become a full-time scientist by taking this degree – all while having the most fun I’ve ever had while working,” she said.

Her next step will be joining the Aquatic Nuisance Species team at Colorado Parks and Wildlife, through the River Corps program. Beyond that, Garcia wants to go to graduate school and hopefully work for either the Colorado Water Conservation Board or Water Education Colorado. Ultimately though, she would like to get involved in legislation.

“The most important thing I learned while studying to be a scientist is ‘science stops at the politician’s desk’ and I would like that not to be true,” she said.

Garcia believes that more scientists should be involved in policy issues and she would like to be one of them. “One day,” she said, “I’d like to advocate for sensible water policies and to represent those people who are always most negatively affected by environmental impacts.”

