

The Super Power of Integrative Learning. An Interview with Jamila dePeiza-Kern '21 about charting her own botanical course.

[Image](#)

“Knowing that everyone here is working to support my interests and needs feels like a super power!”

Senior Jamila dePeiza-Kern (Anthropology major, Landscape Studies minor, Community Engagement & Social Change concentration) has woven a broad range of Botanical Garden experiences into the tapestry of her academic pursuits at Smith. Her advice to students who are curious about making the most of Botanic Garden opportunities is to “come visit, explore, reach out, and talk to the people who work here.”

[The content of this interview has been edited for clarity and flow.]

What are the range of experiences that brought you to the Botanic Garden?

I have had a couple of different positions at the Botanic Garden. I started out as a work study student on the outdoor crew, working on the outdoor collections doing pruning. I got to plant some trees—that was very exciting!—and I got to visit the nursery. During our time away from campus I worked as a video editor and I got to edit videos for the horticulture classes, which was a lot of fun getting to sort of “accompany” the students on their field trips and get to know the places they were virtually visiting. I’m currently working as an education intern, which is also very exciting. I’m helping with the launch of the Botanic Garden Student Educators program (BoGSEs) which I’m very excited about, and this summer I participated in the Botanic Garden internship program. I worked with John Berryhill, the landscape curator, working on benchmarking which is part of the American Public Garden Associations sustainability index.

You also used Praxis to intern with the American Public Garden Association, correct?

Yes I did.

What is the thread that pulls all of this together? What’s the commonality and how does it relate to your academic studies?

I am a Landscape Studies minor, and so I’m very interested in how people interact with the landscapes around them; whether those are natural landscapes or the built environment. I think that the various positions that I have held are all connected through those landscapes and my study of landscapes. I feel like in my landscape studies classes, I have also utilized the Botanic Garden resources a lot. I have studied various campus gardens for projects in class, and so that has also been nice to delve into certain areas of campus more deeply and using the archives and other resources that are available on campus [for these projects].

What is the relationship between what you are learning in the classroom and all the co-curricular experiences?

I would say I always try to take what I learn in the classroom and apply it in practical internship situations, and then I take what I've learned during those practical experiences, and they often inform my learning going forward. For example, after my internship with the American Public Garden Association, I became really interested in sustainable community development and community engagement, so I added a concentration in Community Engagement and Social Change to my portfolio. This summer I also interned with Regenerative Design Group, which is a landscape architecture firm in Greenfield [Massachusetts]. Based on the work I did there, this semester I'm now doing a special studies with [Lecturer in Landscape Studies] Ried Bertone-Johnson and [Senior Instructor in Biology and Botanic Garden Experiential Learning Specialist, Gaby [Immerman], doing a project focused on community center design and LEED [certification], and so I'm taking my experience of community engagement in that internship and now applying it to this project trying to go even more in depth.

What Botanic Garden resources have been the most important to your trajectory?

I would have to say without a doubt all the amazing people that work here. It feels like a super power honestly, knowing that you have all the people working here behind you, because it honestly feels like you can kind of do anything. I remember [last] summer, I was supposed to do the Botanic Garden internship, [which was canceled] when COVID first hit, and I was panicked. Everyone really rallied to make sure all of us interns had other positions, and I feel like it's definitely such a warm community that really lifts up all students, and I know that if I have a problem or a project that I'm excited about, I can come to the people working here and it will become a reality

Is the Botanic Garden just for "plant people"?

No! Definitely not

Were you a plant person before you got here?

I worked in a garden center in high school, so I was definitely interested in plants, but I didn't know as much about the Botanic Garden. I knew there was a greenhouse and I had visited that before, but I didn't know the extent of the Botanic Garden and how many opportunities there were

Thinking back over your three years [at Smith] so far, have these experiences changed where you think you're going, or what you are capable of?

Yeah! Absolutely. Coming to Smith, I was sort of interested in environmental studies and sort of had a very vague idea, but over the past three years I would say that I have learned that I want to work at the intersection of plants and people... I also think it's laid such an important foundation for me. So now I'm interested in landscape architecture and design, and I feel that is something that I want to pursue. But through the *Horticulture*, and *Plants in the Landscape* classes, I've learned that having a really close connection with plants is also really important in the design field. If someone makes a design and includes plantings that don't make any sense or are really hard to maintain, then that's not really beneficial either.

Is there anything you would want students to know who don't know if they "fit in" at the Botanic Garden?

I would say just to come visit, explore, reach out, and talk to the people who work here. I think that it can maybe seem intimidating if you don't have a direct connection... or feel like it's not a place for you, but I think that because everyone is so welcoming and supportive that even if [you don't yet have] a direct connection to plants, that a connection can be found and that everyone will work really hard to help you find that connection and support whatever students want to do.