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Sustain Interview Project

■■■■ (C) interviewed by ■■■■ ■■■■ (G)

Interviewed on 5/9/13

G: So I'm here with ■■■■ ■■■■. And we were just chatting to get ready for the interview and then he said I'm actually trying to maximize the number of risks I try to take, I was actually planning to be homeless this quarter--

C: Can take--

G: That you can take, and I was planning to be homeless and it didn't work out and then I said stop because I need to record it so tell me the story and then I'll tell you what we're doing on the interview.

C: Um, well it kinda started with my roommates who were you know being kind of loud and um, you know for first quarter I was kind of ok with it but by second quarter I was like you know I'd rather be homeless--

G: Are you in the dorms or in an apartment?

C: Yeah I'm in an apartment. Actually that's the weird thing I'm in an apartment but like it doesn't like feel like I have any more privacy. In fact I feel like it was quieter in the dorms--

G: Wow, it must be bad in your apartment.

C: Cause everyone was like, I mean the thing is people don't think we can hear each other but I can hear my roommates. Especially when my roommate, when his girlfriend comes over.

G: I'm so sorry.

C: So awkward. So awkward. And then I mean I intentionally play my music kind of loud to let them know, hey, I can hear you guys. (both laugh) But well they hear--

G: Sure. Sure. So you were going to be homeless and then what happened?

C: Um, well--

G: You said it didn't work out.

C: I wasn't quite sure how to like I mean you know my room is just a mess. There's just too much stuff. I wasn't able to get rid of things. Like there's some books that you know I tried to dump some on ■■■■ and he wouldn't take them. So I gave some to the Goodwill but then there were some that I couldn't give away because you know I still want to read them. Right? But you know so there's just like small items that I can't really keep anywhere and I don't want to pay for you know public storage because you know that would be like paying money to just store stuff and that doesn't really make sense to

me. So, what I decided to do was just kind of hold off on it. I'll probably get a chance to try something like it over the summer because I'm coming back a little bit earlier for something. And um, during that time I'm not going to have any housing. It's really like a week or so before school officially starts. I'm still living on campus this next year but you know in between that time--

G: What's your plan? What's your homelessness going to look like?

C: It's not too bad I'm probably going to sleep in the math lounge. Um, though I'm probably going to switch off just a little bit because I feel like if I sleep in there all the time it's not really being homeless it's like--

G: Sleeping in the math lounge (laughs)

C: It's like bumming out in college. Pretty much.

G: What made you interested in being homeless, or is it a practical matter for you?

C: It is a practical matter. Well part of it is--

G: Or how is it connected to risk is maybe the better question.

C: Um, recently I've been reading Annie Fragile, "(mumbles) to Live" are you familiar with the author?

G: I'm not.

C: He also wrote Black Swan, and Fooled by Randomness. Basically he's some kind of, he used to be a trader on Wall Street. But he also did all sorts of stuff. Majored in philosophy. Um, I mean he's a very general type of thinker.

G: Yeah.

C: So um, and basically his premise is that there are three things, kinds of things in the world. Things that are fragile which are susceptible to volatility so like a large centralized markets are vulnerable to volatility and then there are things that are robust or resilient. And that might be you know a smart phone that's waterproof, you know it will still work under water or something. And then the last things are things that are anti fragile which is kind of a new moniker that he comes up with. It describes things that benefit and sometimes even require volatility. Like um, usually the biggest example would be the human body. You know without a certain level of (mumbles) stress we suffer a little. So it would be like if you never went out into the sun. Yes you can get sunburned if you stay out too long. But if you never go out you know without that UV damage you're actually worse off because you're suffering from you know vitamin D--

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G: So, connect that for me to what you're talking to about yourself in terms of risk.

C: For me um, I actually had this idea before I started reading the book. I just started reading the book just because I thought it was interesting. But I continued reading it because it kind of reaffirmed some of my own thoughts. It's kind of scary. I'm a little scared about how much I feel biased reading it because I agree with it. You know, and I feel like well maybe I'm not being enough of a critical thinker. If I'm agreeing with it so much, but um, basically one example that he uses is two brothers. One is a taxi cab driver and the other works for a financial company I think. So the one that works for a financial company makes, has a larger income but is more susceptible to large devastating risks and also he assumes risks like a mortgage or raising children that would put him you know less susceptible as someone who had less children like his brother the taxi cab driver. The taxi cab driver doesn't have a stable income and is largely dependent on you know the seasonal population of people who need to travel. But at the same time um, he can develop his skills in order to adapt to the environment. He can memorize streets, you know and that makes him a little bit more, I mean they kind of have the same amount of risk but one is more susceptible to it.

G: So bring it back to you because I'm interested.

C: For me, um, I've kinda decided awhile back ago that my work will require me to go to very dangerous places--

G: Your military work or?

C: Even after military actually. Um, I always imagine myself going into places where there just not Qualteca, you know, if you're familiar. You just don't walk into you know this little town, these are dangerous places with dangerous guns and ethnic violence. Or that's kind of what I imagine whatever I do may necessitate.

G: Is that because there's a particular thing you're doing that's connected to those settings? Or, that's just what you see in your head?

C: Um, well it's not all dangerous war zones. Sometimes it might be city but the thing about cities is that there very prone to civil unrest.

G: What's the work you're imagining?

C: Um, I don't know what I'm going to do--

G: Got it.

C: I have a goal. So, it's really whatever needs to achieve that. Right now I'm still tweaking out the details about how I'm going to go about it.

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G: I see. Can I launch us over to a topic that may or may not be far from this and that's your experience in Sustain. Is there any bridge between what you're talking about so, what I hear is that you're doing a lot of really, I want to use a better word, but I would say impressive reflection on the way that you go at the world it sounds to me like, so you're considering risk not just as an idea but, I was kind of pushing you to make connections. It sounds to me like there's a connection between the stuff you're chewing on in your head and then what you're willing to do in terms of homelessness. I think that's there. Is that there for you?

C: It is and it's really not that complicated. It's just about being highly adaptable.

G: Ok, yeah.

C: I mean if you think about it from a utilitarian point of view you know I would like to be able to regardless of the environment, like say I ended up in Russian prison. You know even in that situation I would still like to be able to um I want to say maneuver but that implies just movement and I'm talking about a little bit more than that. But it's a military term that I think is rather apt. Because if you're familiar with war, modern wars, um, one of the most essential elements is being able to be in the right place at the right time. So in that sense it's kind of like mobility. But obviously I'm talking about more than just like getting to places, it's also being able to adapt to the environment. And um, you know sometimes that might require certain intellectual skills that I'm trying to pick up. So that's kind of where college plays in.

G: I see.

C: Trying to pick up things like well there's math, which is kind of like the foundation. Though the direction I'm going with math is really more um applicable towards sociology. So right now I'm talking game theory. You know I'm trying to model human behavior. Or approximating human behavior. But trying to get in a mindset of being able to understand those kinds of things.

G: I see. Can you connect, so our real purpose here, our scope here is for me, I was saying to you when we sat down I have a different role so, it's kind of a fun job and that's just to sit and ask you the question what's happened to you since Sustain? What do you think happened to you in Sustain and where do you see that you've come since? We're interviewing all the alums basically to try to understand what the impact has been or if that has been an impact--

C: Oh, I think there's a huge impact--

G: So anything you can say about that.

C: Um, part of it, um, I always thought of it as Sustain and ROTC as being kind of separate in organization. You know different groups of people, well actually ██████,

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██████ is in ROTC now--

G: Yeah!

C: So there's--

G: You called her ██████. (laughs)

C: Yeah. You go by last names, um. But, um, I always kind of wondered why it wasn't quite, why I didn't really experience any cognitive dissonance.

G: In Sustain? Or in ROTC?

C: Well, the act of being in both.

G: Oh, ok.

C: Because you know what does cognitive dissonance rise from? It rises from being in two different environments that you have to switch in between. It each has its unique identity um and I was always kind of curious like oh, that's not really, you know I never felt uncomfortable in either one, well not because you know I was like oh, I'm in this one and I really only should be in one. I mean I have felt uncomfortable in both but--

G: Right.

C: Not for that reason. But back to your question. I think for me Sustain working on the project really taught me about working in groups. That is what I really valued from it. Because before that I never had to coordinate with people. And having people rely on you makes you recognize yourself as part of a larger group. Which wasn't very available, like that thought didn't cross my mind in high school. In high school, I was very, I want to say individualistic. But senior year I was very disillusioned with everything. You know, I mean, I considered the social group that I was with to be a bunch of Asian academic elitist. And that was kind of like, you know I didn't really want to participate in it. Um, and at the same time I didn't really feel comfortable with the people in the humanities class or --

G: In high school?

C: Yeah, well to clarify, the humanities class is actually a class that most high school students take at my high school if they failed an English class. So this was pretty much the opposite end of the academic spectrum. Have you been to ██████'s classes, or Ethnic Studies? They're in Sustain this year, but um, this was a social problem that they actually mentioned. My high school was very diverse but it wasn't, it was very stratified at the same time. So, you know being in that kind of stratified environment I didn't really feel comfortable towards the end of my high school years really associating with any

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groups at all. Where as in earlier in high school it didn't really matter. You just take your classes, take your AP classes, you know take honors, be smart.

G: How was it socially for you inside Sustain?

C: I really liked it. It brought I thought a wider range of opinions that I would have normally gotten. Because um, yeah, I think that was why I liked it--

G: Do you have any insights about your ideas of stratification in terms of Sustain?

C: Stratification? Hmm, I'll say this much. The perception of the well being of the project was an important factor.

G: Keep talking.

C: Like, I thought our project went very well.

G: Which project were you on?

C: Oh Creek Commons.

G: Ok.

C: And I think part of our success was due to physicality of our final product. I mean that was, I heard there's a group now that actually um does not necessarily have a physical product but has produced immense change in the lives of I forget which one it was. But I was asking ██████ about it. But you know for us I think for Creek Commons we felt proud. We had something.

G: Yeah.

C: We went to dinner and we showed it off and you know there was that process and we were able to do it for really really cheap and we didn't have any money like this year. (laughs) So that was something that was very hands on which is something that we value here at Cal Poly and has been emphasized. But at the same time we are cognizant of the fact that there are other groups who did not have a physical product who idd not do as well or were perceived to not have done as well or thought you know, oh well our project wasn't that great. Or, oh their project wasn't that great. So, I feel like the project kind of, the projects were really important--

G: Yeah.

C; But they also kind of determined, um, I want to say it was competitive.

G: Huh. That's not something we talked about or that I remember--doesn't mean it didn't

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happen I just don't remember--

C: Right. No actually when I say it wasn't competitive I really do mean that--

G: You don't feel like it was competitive inside Sustain?

C: No.

G: Oh, ok.

C: But. That being said, I mean I want to make that very, because I know when people say, well, it wasn't--but you know the implication is that it was. Yeah, I'm not implying that. But we're well aware of groups who did not seem as um, oh, I want to say a military term--

G: You can say a military term.

C: Um, squared away. Part of that, well, I'm not really quite sure why that was. Because we, I wasn't familiar with the end results with everyone's project, so that's kind of the piece I was missing. You know we did a lot of benchmarks in between but there weren't presentations about the final projects.

G: Yeah, to each other, huh?

C: Yeah. If it was a total disaster you never know. If it went great you'd never know.

G: That's interesting, yeah.

C: But from what we were able to extrapolate it was very clear that some projects were going very well and some were not you know were still stuck in the planning phase.

G: Yeah. So you said that being part of Sustain taught you something about working in groups? What did it teach you?

C: The importance of being there, actually I learned that today because I haven't been to PT very recently partially because I don't have an obligation to.

G: Physical Training, PT.

C: Right. I don't have, because I'm not contracted I haven't signed a contract, I don't have to do anything. In ROTC. But today after you know leading PT, I recognized that because I wasn't there for other people they weren't there for me. Like those, if you saw me, it wouldn't actually seem like it was that small of a group to you but compared to how people there are actually should have been I felt very uncomfortable and I think it effected my command presence. So that was kind of a factor in my performance I think.

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G: So do I understand you saying that if you had been present, so if you had attended the PT leadership of your cohorts they would have likely shown up knowing you were going to lead and then wanting to be there. Is that what I'm hearing you say?

C: Yes--

G: I see.

C: That might be a narrative I just constructed because I haven't asked anyone, hey--but I mean even so I felt that now that I have lead I would like to be placed in a position of trust. It's important to me that, uh, when others lead PT they can entrust me with this. Um, keeping the time. You know cause I had to do that. And you know, I couldn't really find anyone today so I had to you know keep the time myself which was kind of my plan but really it would have been better to have done you know gone with the other and you know had someone else manage things. The ability to delegate tasks is kind of an important skill. So that's something that I think I lacked and also it wasn't too much for Sustain I felt present for Sustain but there were definitely moments where I was like, oh, I'm not going to show up to our meeting or whatever. We're just going to sit there and we're not really going to go over anything important. So, um, our project manager, well, uh, ■■■■ was kind of on me for that and I appreciate him for that because honestly he was a much better project manager than I was. I was a very bad project manager. Tanner was, like they were kind of more leaders. But I learned a lot from being in an experience of you know like what faculties do you have to encourage in order to produce a good team. You know things like shared ownership, and you know being able to coordinate people.

G: Yeah, interesting. Any other reflections or connections? Your brain is busy. Has it been busy on anything on your experience in Sustain? What's it been chewing on?

C: Hmm. Recently it's been, uh, a dear friend just texted me yesterday and he has some issues. I talked to Roger about that, I kind of had an emergency meeting whenever I've been able to catch him.

G: Rogers helped me. I've had emergency meetings with ■■■■ before. (laughs.)

C: Yeah, um, and I was able uh, you know to get some advice about morality you know like is it ok to lie? You know if its a service to the greater good? You know perhaps for the individual but might be opposed to the larger organization, so society versus the individual. I'm thinking very hard about, well this is something I think about almost every night but um, how I will go about achieving that, my end game if you will, I'm talking about strategically. Do you want something really recent?

G: (Laughing) Bless your heart, so--

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C: Because last night I was--

G: I will interject and say this interview is very Sustainesque is how I'm describing it. And that is of course in the traditional model I could have sat down and said, "here are ten questions I will ask you to.." and our real interest is to find out what are people still thinking about in terms of Sustain. Or what, um, what are recognizing in yourself as you look at yourself like backwards and then over towards Sustain. Is there any change you see in yourself? We're really not, and some students have come out and said, "do you need like a commercial? Do you need like an endorsement?" And it really is a research study. So it really is our desire to say, what happened to you do you think through that process of being in the Sustain community?

C: Well I still feel very connected to Sustain, so um--

G: So it could be that I'm talking about it in the past and your experiencing it in the present.

C: Yeah, I'm still experiencing it because--

G: Yeah, yeah, and that's interesting information. How are you experiencing it now?

C: Um, last quarter I took GEs with Sustain. This quarter I'm taking Music of the 60s.

G: Ok, oh, I love to hear that connection.

C: And I also helped out with um, you know just some of the groups like one day that day Friday I was working with Wiki SLO. I've been, there's some work being done at the Laureate school where we were basically spreading mulch and just garden work. So I helped out with that. Um, let's see. Yeah so I've still been able to work with some of the groups, not on a regular basis but just once or twice.

G: What do you think the primary impact if there has been one has been on you from our past/current connection with the Sustain community?

C: Impact, um. I'm sorry--

G: Influence, it's ok, so you could think in terms of influence, you could think in terms of..

C: Could you rephrase that question because I actually didn't quite understand it?

G: Yeah--

C: It's funny I've gotten everything you've said so far I think, but that last question, influence,--

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G: So if you imagine the Sustain community as a pool you chose to jump in, and you're swimming around in it, sounds like currently still, some of the question we're asking is, what do you see that you would be like now had you not jump in the pool? And what are you like now that you did jump in the pool? Does that help anymore? That maybe helps release the word impact.

C: Ok--

G: Which is maybe a military word that you see in terms of a bomb falling on something (both laugh a little) because you're the first person to squirm with that word.

C: Yeah, no, I was just a little bit confused because it sounded a little bit repetitive. Like, I feel like you've asked me like--

G: So it's possible that you, so that is a possible answer ██████ so say, I've said everything I have to say--

C: No, but if you want to go through a hypothetical, what I would be like without Sustain--

G: We don't have to if you feel like you've said what there is to say--

C: No, well--

G: And maybe that's a question you'd like to answer: is there anything else you'd like to say?

C: It's hard to disentangle what, I mean, it's hard to imagine what I would be without the institutions I'm involved in--

G: Yeah.

C: If I removed all of them, you know, I imagine I'd be some kind of sociopath.

G: This is true. Ok, we can end there.

C: Ok.

G: I love the idea of ending with the word sociopath, it's great. I totally appreciate your time.

G ██████: Ok, so ██████ and I stopped and I explained to him why I kept asking the same question, and now we found ourselves, I told him that I'm hearing a lot about leadership from a lot of people that I saw in what he was sharing and he said, I think--well repeat

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what you said, I just want to capture a couple of thoughts about what he said about failure and leadership.

C: Ok, well, this is my hypothesis but the presence of failure has led to the emergence of leadership. And I mean this is partially based on my own personal experience outside of Sustain but I think when people experience failure they recognize or they begin to examine what am I doing, why am I doing it, because you know sometimes people just get handed something and then they just go through the motions which happens to quite a few people. But you know when you really, as a leader you have to have some kind of vision, you have to think, what am I going to do? How's this going to benefit? Will it benefit? And I know I said I thought our group did very well you know Oak Creek Commons--

G: Yeah.

C: But actually I remember there's this distinct point during our history where we faced a crisis and I think it's those kinds of crises, you know, it might be personal but having that crisis and dissociated sense of uncomfortability leads to growth--

G: Did you say discomfort, so discomfort?

C: Oh, yeah, sorry, discomfort.

G: No, it's ok, I'm just wanting to make sure you weren't saying comfort. Yeah--

C: Yeah, so. Like part of um that is why you know, oh, there's some kind of, you know we see people in leadership because once you've screwed up I mean you're not only willing to take more risks if you're affect-able you're able to understand maybe what went wrong, and you're able to adjust yourself. And you know all these things just kind of happen. And you also know like how to plan better, how to manage yourself better, manage your time, manage your course work. You get an idea of what's feasible and what's not. Like, oh, you know our project, you know, if we think about it wasn't really doable or why were we doing our project? We aren't quite sure. Um, I'm grateful that my (mumbles) checked, you know the ones I shared with my teammates actually went really well and we were able to move from that moment of crisis, because that moment could have wiped us out. We could have had nothing. I feel like that was a very real reality where it was like we had planned so much and we you know we realized, this is a funny thing to tell a math major, but our calculations were wrong. And then we went over with community partners and thankfully they were engineers. And they were like, yes, we realize this and its not a problem but that was because there was a supporting community and you know they were aware. But we were not aware. To explain a little more in detail, we thought the rainwater would last the whole season depending you know considering the amount of water that falls and the amount of water that they use and our calculations ran short. It really wouldn't have.

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G: Huh.

C: But we were able to kind of move past that and actually continue with our project um so even though we weren't able to deliver something that could last the whole year like provide all their water needs for their garden um, we were able to produce a product that was able to collect some water and probably the most important part could be expanded so--

G: Yeah, so interesting.

C: That's kind of what um, kinda like you know that's the growth essentially.

G: Yeah. Do you have anything to say about how you see the capacity of the opportunity for failure in the traditional model, the traditional learning model?

C: It really doesn't have any. Because the thing about what happens when you finish a class. You finish a class, you get a grade, and that grade determines a GPA and you may or may not come out with-- you probably get some critical reasoning skills, or you know just the ability to think in that environment even if you don't necessarily don't remember the material or the definitions or, for me, theorems.

G: Yeah.

C: Um, but um, I feel and I'm not quite sure why this is, at first I thought people were really competitive and maybe that might because of the presence of the curve can actually produce competitiveness and reduce the the likelihood of cooperation. I mean I don't have any data to test this--

G: Sure, sure. You've got to remember my inquiry product about assessment it was the same thing, I'm just running after my gut.

C: Like no one's going to say Oh yeah I want you to fail tomorrow's test so the curve will be, you know (laughing) no ones going to say that out loud. But you know I can't help but wonder you know just looking at it as a system you know being able to recognize like, hmmm--

G: Interesting. You kind of hope other people will tank--

C: How might this be dysfunctional? How might this not serve you know the purpose that you intend where as you know if there wasn't a curve perhaps people would have cooperated and studied together and not worried about, oh, he's going to get a higher grade and you know even if he gets .1% if he's in that bracket I'm going to drop to the next one.

G: Yeah, so interesting.

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C: I mean I've seen instances where that hasn't happened because there's, like in any theory class something very interesting happens, the professor offered a 10 % increase that would shift the average, so you know 70 up to a B, if one person volunteered to take a 10% drop on his or her midterm.

G: Wow!

C: Someone did it.

G: Do you think, was it just like a human experiment that he was doing?

C: Um, yes--

G: Or was he trying to protect his own, I guess that wouldn't protect his own averages--

C: No, this was, this was kind of interesting because he had done it before and what happened was every time someone volunteered. Sometimes it was really clear because he only gave like a minute for people to decide.

G: woooooow.

C: The presence of altruism, I mean that was something I was like how did that come about?

G: I wonder what initiated his desire to watch that.

C: I don't know but I've seen it happen, um like, the prisoners dilemma and simulations, like most people, are you familiar with it? The prisoner's dilemma?

G: No.

C: It's basically if you, two people are in jail. They can either choose to defect or squeal or whatever or they can decide to keep silent. And um, you know the solution would be to defect, um and in simulations we see that you know usually people decide to defect even though it results in a lower pay off for both where as if they cooperated they would just have gotten a higher pay off, you know a lower sentence. In this case during their simulations, I haven't read the paper on this but what they found was there was evolution, you know things are a little different when you play repeated games as opposed to a one time game so when they played, or when they simulated the plays um, it eventually went from defection to something called tit for tat. So if you um, decide to cooperate you know, I would choose to cooperate. If you choose to defect then I would choose to defect. But you know after about a millionth iteration they began to see altruism where people would still choose to cooperate as oppose to defect. Don't know what it says about human nature but it's very interesting nonetheless. Um, you know like even in

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machines like how does something like that arise? Is it natural?

G: Huh, I love it, thank you ██████.