

Blog Post #4

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My internship ended the Friday before last, and I've spent the last week reflecting on the experience. I've been road tripping from Los Angeles to New Orleans, so I've had a lot of time to think. When I left the office Friday afternoon, I was overwhelmed with relief, ready to embrace the last few weeks of summer. I think I resented this internship a little bit, particularly towards the end, because I felt like it had robbed me of my summer - my commute was nearly an hour and a half, and I spent six hours at the office every day, so there wasn't a whole lot of time for much else. I guess I was still stuck in that youthful mindset that summer is supposed to be spent

on vacation, swimming, barbequing and roasting marshmallows – all fireworks and sunshine. However, my dad reminded me that he hasn't had that kind of "summer" since he graduated high school – responsibilities don't disappear just because it's beach weather. And as obvious as this may seem, this realization allowed me to see my internship experience in a new light – my whole concept of "summer" has been redefined, so this summer set the bar.

I spent the summer in my little nook in the corner of the office, with my supervisor's office on my right and the other intern on my left. My responsibilities were not specific – as a "Special Projects Intern", my job description was fluid, often changing on an as-needed basis. I conducted research, created industry-wide contact lists, contributed to reports, and aided in the coordination and execution of events hosted by New Orleans Business Alliance. The changing nature of my internship was one of my favorite parts – I found the weeks dedicated entirely to research to be tedious, and, to put it bluntly, a little mind-numbing.

As a reminder, the Learning Objectives I had outlined at the beginning of the summer are as follows:

1. Learn about potential career paths with an economics degree and network with professionals in different fields.
2. Understand the importance of research and planning in a business environment and in impacting economic change.
3. Gain confidence in an office setting and in my business abilities.
4. Utilize the knowledge I've accumulated from my academic background and apply it in real life scenarios.
5. Become more familiar with the New Orleans economy, and also work towards more personal independence living in this city.

A week or so after the conclusion of my internship, I can assuredly say that I've made significant progress in three of these goals: 2, 3, and 5. I have performed an exorbitant amount of research, finding contact informations to assemble resource directories, creating in-house reports with information on different organizations and companies, and other projects. And while the research often seemed pointless to me, something that anyone could do, I know that it allowed different projects being conducted by different departments to run much smoother: information that I had found over the course of hours from dozens of different websites was summarized neatly on a page or two, simple and clear. Though it was not always the most

rewarding task, its importance was undeniable. Similarly, thorough planning was crucial: as a relatively new organization, NOLABA still has yet to smooth out some of the kinks in setting universal protocols and procedures, and my supervisor has explained to me how that can hold up projects. She also explained to me all of the planning that goes into coordinating an event, and even had me create a universal event planning checklist, from figuring out a guest list, to setting a theme, to renting technology equipment.

As far as gaining confidence in an office setting, I got to a place about halfway through the summer where I felt like I had earned the right to be there. I was comfortable talking to most of the NOLABA team, I had no problem getting up to stretch my legs when I felt like I needed a break, and I felt like I had developed a good rhythm at work, and I knew when to take initiative and when to ask questions. I would by no means call myself business savvy, but having worked in an office has given me a new working experience beyond the food industry and customer service.

Finally, I think that my understanding of New Orleans has expanded exponentially. I know my way around the CBD, I often gave directions to tourists on the streetcar who saw me in my slacks and blazer and deemed me a local, and I found myself a regular at several coffee and sandwich places near where I work. I also have a better understanding of New Orleans from an economic standpoint – I know where we thrive, and where we struggle, what industries are the biggest focuses. I know that New Orleans often attracts young talent (especially with all the colleges), but has a hard time with talent migration and needs to find a way to retain young professionals and entrepreneurs. This is my proudest summer accomplishment, that I have reached a level of independence that resembles adulthood – it was the first time in my experience as a “young adult” where maturity and autonomy felt like my life, instead of like I was faking it, a kid playing dress-up. It made me feel as if I could do more.

Moving forward, I'd like to explore other career paths that I could pursue with an Economics degree. I'd like to work for a large, bureaucratic company with clearly outlined job descriptions and responsibilities. My supervisor strongly encouraged that now that I've worked at a small nonprofit, I should try a work for an established national or international company, so that I can have a fuller idea of what working in business might entail. I intend to network with as many alumni as possible, to forge stronger relationships with professors and read about what career path I might want to follow. I realize that I don't have as much time as I thought, and summer is about

moving forward, not standing still and dreading September. Now, I'm looking forward to September, to when the Tulane community is back at full capacity and I can take advantage of all of the resources – academic, professional, and personal – at my disposal. I think that this experience has made me a much more confident, capable individual, and I am not so fearful of taking risk and making decisions. I am more resourceful, more creative, and ultimately, more effective in problem solving. The autonomy I experienced this summer has made me take a much more active role in my life: It has been easy thus far, I went to high school, I went to college – this was the first time where I felt like I had to make a real decision for myself, and whether or not the decision to stay and work in New Orleans this summer was the right one, I'm glad that I decided. Sometimes decisive women in positions of authority are considered “cold,” “bossy,” or “controlling,” where men exhibiting the same traits are “ambitious” and “strong-willed,” and that double standard can be intimidating – however, what I saw at NOLABA, where the male-to-female ratio is relatively even, women in authority are treated with respect. The women I worked with were so confident in their abilities and steadfast in their opinions – their behavior, and the way they carried themselves demanded respect so they didn't have to do it outright. I think that having that confidence, that security in your own abilities, is the best way to successfully attain and handle leadership as a woman – an ability that is often learned rather than innate, as a result of social expectations and traditions, of being treated as second-class citizens for centuries.

While there were certainly negative aspects of my internship – the commute was long, the work could be tedious, there was not a lot of interaction and collaboration – the experience was invaluable. To a student interested in interning at my host organization, I would advise them to walk in with an open mind. Walking in with expectations is asking for disappointment, and can prevent you from getting as much out of the experience as possible. I would also advise any future intern to network early, and talk with the rest of the team as soon as they start, because if you wait, it starts to feel awkward (and the beginning is always awkward anyways, so you might as well be forward). For a student interested in interning in the economic development industry in general, my biggest advice would be to celebrate the little victories. It can be hard work, and sometimes feels unrewarding on a smaller scale – it takes years for real change to happen, so it's important to appreciate the learning experience, and to see the virtue in small rewards.