**Uniting to Reform:**

**Collective Action Across the County to Reform the Juvenile Justice System**

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SPA 391: Leadership Internship

Fall 2020

4 December 2020

**Introduction**

This past semester I worked as a communications intern at the Coalition for Juvenile Justice. Due to Covid-19, my internship was conducted remotely. Last semester I took a course entitled, interest group politics. During that time, I expressed my interest in law school to my professor who was a law school graduate, a registered lobbyist and had previously worked for several campaigns and during the Obama Administration. Given my interest in the course she emailed me contacts at a few coalitions and interest groups in DC, one of them being the Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ).

During my time at CJJ I was able to participate in a variety of projects and tasks. From improving my professional writing skills through contributing to a peer resource guide of ethnic and racial disparities, a CJJ blog post and other correspondence to members, to using my research skills to help find figures and statistics for presentations, speeches, reports and more. I was also able to organize spreadsheets for CJJs annual conference that was virtual this year and perform outreach to presenters for the purpose of collecting all appropriate information for conference presenters.

In this report, I will reflect on my time at CJJ and the goals that I came in with and that I grew to have in my day to day work. I will also reflect on the activities that I took part in as well as my expectations, takeaways, skills gained and lessons learned.

**Goals and Activities**

Coming into this internship, I had a few goals. Before this internship I interned for two summers with a local political figure at the Massachusetts State House first as a legislative aide intern and then as a communications intern. As a senior with graduation fast approaching, I was focused on wanting to improve my professional writing skills and experience as well as compiling enough work if needed for a portfolio. Another goal I had was to become more acquainted with a work environment, although it was virtual, I hoped that I would be able to gain a better perception of what work culture is like as well as build relationships with my coworkers to use as resources going forward. Not only did I have a goal of becoming better acquainted with work culture, but also building mentor relationships with my coworkers to use as guides and reference points in my future.

Although I had a lot of goals, I believe I met most of them. The reason being that they entailed skills that I knew were my strengths and within my wheelhouse. During my time, I was able to write a variety of styles of work including, a blog post that was posted onto the main website, letters to members, analysis for sections of the peer resource guide on racial and ethnic disparities, correspondence with members of the Coalition as well as presenters for the Coalitions annual conference. I was also tasked with writing up and creating social media posts for the office’s various media platforms. Along with all of this, I also wrote up notes on different meetings and seminars I attended as well as researched different data points needed by my supervisor, Naomi, for various presentations or projects she was presenting. From this I was able to strengthen my writing skills and have a diverse portfolio of writing to show that I am someone acquainted with different styles and not afraid to jump into any type of assignment and work hard, complete it and complete it well. Another other goal I had was acquainting myself to a professional workplace. Although my internship was remote which restricted many aspects of the work place environment and all that it entails, I was able to gain co-worker social skills in terms of finding and maintaining workplace colleagues who I knew I could turn to to ask any and all questions I had. Along with that, I was able to also learn the importance of speaking up in our morning team meetings with fellow colleagues in terms of voicing my availability to help, confusion with current projects or concerns about any areas of worry. In terms of my goal in connecting with coworkers to engage in a mentor relationship and have them as contacts for the future I achieved that in my prioritization of building real working relationships with my coworkers whether it was teaming up to help them on different projects to setting up meetings with them to get advice on how to get involved and what I aimed to get out of this internship. My strong work ethic, willingness to not be ashamed to ask questions and always be willing to volunteer for different projects showed them that I was a serious team player who was looking to get everything out of this internship.

My duties at CJJ varied and depended on what was needed by my supervisor and other coworkers. Although I was a communications intern, I also participated in other areas outside of communications such as working with another employee in creating a master spreadsheet that included all the conference presenters with their biographies that would be a part of the program. I worked directly with staff to compile the list and cross reference different versions of the agenda to adapt the list based on those who had to drop out or those who were added at the last minute based on accepted presentations. From there, I collected biographies that were submitted with applications, and cross referenced those notes to highlight those whose bios we were missing and those who were accounted for and all set. After, I copied the spreadsheet into a word document where I alphabetized presenters with their bios attached for a final readover by myself and the staff to then send to the company putting on our virtual conference. This project was a big undertaking given that this was the first year that CJJ was holding their conference virtually and I was the only intern working on this assignment side by side with the full time staff members, and director of the Coalition. This project allowed me to be in an area of leadership in terms of delegating tasks to my coworkers in the form of having them overview the work that was being done and having them be an extra set of eyes to make sure nothing was missed. With all the cross referencing that I had to do with this project, I got more and more nervous once finalizations had to be made to send to the company who would be putting together the online conference package. Not wanting to make any mistakes or issues that would disrupt my coworkers or make them question my abilities, I meticulously checked, rechecked and then checked again this spreadsheet and document every day at the office to account for updates, changes or other issues that might or could arise.

Another project I was able to work on during my time at CJJ was writing and posting a blog post. After a one on one meeting with my supervisor, Naomi, who suggested I write about a vote that was soon to happen on important policy platforms within the Coalition, I got right to work. It was a long process because I was adjusting my style of writing to an informative yet semi-formal tone given the concept of a blog post. The editing process was long and intense, but it taught me how to efficiently and effectively voice my message in a professional and direct way. Being able to write a blog post that was posted onto CJJ’s website that informed the public and members of the Coalition of all that we are doing to help the juvenile justice system was fulfilling in that I was able to recognize the power that my words and writing had as an advocate for this issue in America.

**Analysis of Internship**

Having the opportunity to have an internship during this pandemic was humbling. Knowing that a lot of offices, be they organizations, corporations or anything in between were not hiring due to the impact of the pandemic, I was very grateful to have received an offer and opportunity to work at CJJ this fall. Being able to intern for an organization that was a Coalition and worked with all states opened my eyes to different styles and applications of leadership. Although I was worried at the beginning about not knowing much about juvenile justice, I liked that I came in with an empty slate, no expectations and was a sponge, absorbing all the information available to me to gain more knowledge on the topic as well as be an advocate for what the sector needs.

Given that I did not have any prior knowledge of what juvenile justice entailed, my expectations were set pretty low. Throughout the pandemic, I was realistic in that things would be very different from normal so I wasn’t sure how working from home or how a remote internship at this nation-wide coalition would operate. My previous remote intern experience was for a local state representative in my home state, which consisted of contacting and working with local officials and constituents. This internship at CJJ, however, was a coalition of State Advisory Groups, all working to improve the juvenile justice system. Given that they were an advocacy group as well as a coalition, I expected to be working on a lot of legislation with politicians on Capitol Hill and writing various letters and reports, given what I had heard during my interest group politics class. However, it was different from that, but different in a good way. Although there were some meetings we could attend with staff from a Senator's office, a lot of our work was with organizations and groups whose focus is in this same sector. It also included hearing from and talking with individuals with firsthand experience with juvenile justice, whether it be a child who was in the system, a parent or guardian or a member of law enforcement.

During my four years in the leadership program, I learned from my experience on the steering committee in my two roles as diversity and inclusion co-coordinator and second-year TA, as well as through the lectures and readings, the importance of leadership and the different styles that are effective during certain situations. My internship and the experience I had at CJJ relates to my work in the leadership program through the different styles of leadership I and others exhibited. In my reflection of the environment and mindset at CJJ there was an emphasis on adaptive leadership and service leadership. Given the daily changes that came along with covid-19, I had to be open to changes all the time, whether that meant daily tasks or meetings changed at the last minute or formatting of different tasks changed due to tech issues. There was also the element of adaptability when it came to how we approached or presented different information that might be sensitive or difficult for certain groups. I also saw the relation between the leadership program and this internship in terms of how the staff interacted. There was an emphasis there, like there is in the leadership program, of the respect given to others and the importance of listening to different viewpoints and perspectives. This was very apparent to me in a set of focus groups that CJJ hosted with different stakeholders in the juvenile justice system, ranging from former youth convicts, parents and families affected by youth incarceration, law enforcement, and policy workers from the State Advisory Groups a part of CJJ. Being able to host separate focus groups for each group of stakeholders, allowed CJJ and their executive board to create policy that included concerns and information that was highlighted from each group.

Given all of this, I learned even more about leadership which I am excited to bring back to the leadership program next semester during the capstone course as well as in my role as a TA to the second-year class. Their emphasis on inclusion and effective communication was something that stood out to me and is something that I think not only the leadership program but every team out there can work to improve and emphasize in their goals for progress and professional development. During the deeply divided times we are living in, now more than ever it is important to have honest and hard conversations with a variety of people from all different backgrounds. But with that comes the importance of listening and really understanding where they are coming from on certain issues and the reasons why. I have found that a lot of times people are taking at others instead of with others and listening has become a lost art to some. I hope that through my experience at CJJ, I can bring back with me to the leadership program and others on campus, the importance of talking WITH others instead of at others as well as being patient and listening to others points of view even if you might not agree with them. Because at the end of the day, we all will never agree on everything, specific details will be spatted over, but if we can all agree on our main objective and role in society and helping others given the different platforms or tools we have, I think we will be able to take this, that I got from CJJ, with us through life.

Some classes and experiences that I had prior to this internship also helped me learn a lot from my experience at CJJ. During my interest group politics class the idea of advocacy was a major component of class in explaining what the role of interest groups and lobbyists were as well as the fact that they were experts in their respective fields. At CJJ, I learned that we were advocates for improving youth incarceration and the juvenile justice system in all that it entailed in and outside of its sphere in terms of who were affected and how different figures or structures were affected as a result of the youth incarceration system.

Additionally, my role in the leadership program and the duality of implementing a group and individual social action project helped me in this internship in regard to highlighting the importance of team work as well as independence and advocating for oneself in a team. These lessons helped me during my time at CJJ to advocate for myself when I was overwhelmed, confused or looking for more work as well as organizing the other interns into a team dynamic to have open communication regarding who was working on what and who needed help with what.

When reflecting on this internship experience I believe that my understanding of leadership has grown even more. Leadership and the lessons of understanding leadership are not stagnant. They will continue to forever grow as our world, society and culture continue to evolve. What was most profound to me was the fact that leadership and the work of leadership is not done for oneself but for others. And the work that leaders do is meant to help others. Leaders are public servants. When I interned, I went into every day with the reminder that the work I was doing was for others and would have a direct impact at some point on the names of individuals I did not even know. This internship offered me humility in that I was not doing an internship or working for college credit, but rather I was interning to learn more about myself, the need and work of leaders and the real issues that were being addressed in our country.

This internship taught me that you must remember why you got into the work you got into and why you are working hard. Although it can be hard to think outside of what you have to do and where you want to get to in this job and role and in your own life, what really matters is remembering who you are doing the work for and who it will affect. I will forever be grateful for the time I had at CJJ and all that I learned, not only about youth incarceration but also the importance of leadership and the indirect and direct impact it has on others. Although many think direct impacts of leadership are all that matter, I think indirect impacts matter just as much due to the time and efforts invested.

**Conclusion**

This internship allowed me the opportunity to learn more about an area, that being youth incarceration, that I did not know much about prior to coming in. It also allowed me an opportunity to see all that I had read about and studied in the leadership program come to life. Having the privilege to work alongside professionals and real advocates in this area gave me the opportunity to learn about their backgrounds and tough work in fighting for what they believe in. I truly believe that this internship allowed me the opportunity to not only grow as a lifelong learner, but also as a developing young professional looking to expand my knowledge and work experience across sectors, to help make me an aggressive candidate moving forward.

Being able to perform many different tasks in this role also allowed for me to grow my work ethic and skills set in a diverse and successful way. I now have a clearer idea of what is required in terms of writing an effective and aggressive piece that will attract others to become curious and want to get involved. Words matter, adn the words I was able to write and put into messages will hopefully matter in CJJ’s mission of reforming youth incarceration and the juvenile justice system both at the state level and also at the national level.