

Coop Reflection

This coop cycle was perhaps my favorite and most influential thus far. Admittedly I wasn't necessarily thrilled about this position from the start as it wasn't necessarily in my field, nor was it in an organization captures your imagination when described to my peers. That being said, it was a very much set the stage for me to situate myself not only within a career path which embodies my interests and passions, but further allowed me to make use of many of the critical thinking and problem solving skills I had developed throughout my course work.

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation lacks much of the appeal that many look for when deciding on a coop experience to undertake, especially for their third and final coop. The building is a very standard government building, no frills, no freebies and a general lack of appeal which so many private sector firms advertise as 'workplace culture'. Most employees work for the weekend in a very standard 9-5 format full of identical cubicles, regimented, mundane work days and unavoidable water-cooler talk with similarly uninspired workers. I am happy to report that the legislative branch was quite a different experience.

From the first day I could see obvious differences between my colleagues and other MassDot employees. Everything from the dress code to the manner in which these individuals carried themselves had distinct differences. While the administrative branch was decorated in the same sad shades of beige and blue, the office itself was a dynamic bustling marketplace of high foot traffic and constant shouting of industry jargon, political name dropping and impromptu problem solving efforts. In short from the very first day it was clear that MassDot was an ongoing house fire which demanded all hands on deck to manage, not that anyone held put the faintest hope of putting it out.

Much of this energy came from the people who this office, rubbed shoulders with. It wasn't an uncommon sight to have mayors, governors, state representatives and senators walking between meetings with the Secretary of Transport and her cabinet or to see managers of large scale infrastructure projects joking with highway district coordinators in the hallways. The legislative team was a small part of this busy environment with 10-15 direct staff which worked closely with MassDot executive branch and departments of planning, and communications. While the roles of these departments largely focused on making sure public facing events, happened without incident (which was relatively common), the legislative branch was specifically concerned with the political and legal developments throughout the state. Within the political sphere this office was made up predominantly of political veterans who through years of work within various campaigns had found themselves representing the state as an entirely bipartisan institution. These political legacies were well known throughout MassDot and even other state departments. On many occasions, disclosure of MassDot legislative affiliation would be followed immediately with a question of "Well whose campaign did you work on to get in there?". While this was sometimes said as a joke between those who had followed one another between administrations, it also reinforced the idea that these were not only skilled politicians, but also well connected ones.

This sense of cohesion was perhaps one of the most important aspects of this coop that I had previously not experienced. There was a true sense that my colleagues had gained access to their position through not only diligent work in their field, but further through fostering of connections over the course of a career. I was lucky enough to find both friendship and mentorship in many of my coworkers who emphasized the ability of offices like theirs to act as revolving doors both to promote upward mobility for promising young staff within the department, between other state departments even private firms who partnered with these state entities. While these opportunities were abundant, they were heavily dependent on the ability to prove yourself useful within these complicated political settings.

The ability to negotiate these tenuous political interactions calmly and diplomatically was key to success in this office. While many of my colleagues were the products of specific political candidacies, the office itself was entirely politically neutral in its daily functions. The only priority was transportation functions

for the state, an issue which needed to be addressed in a manner which pleased both sides of the aisle. It was of note that satisfying the Republican minority in state legislature was a great sink of resources for our department, especially when issues of environmental concern were being presented such as the Interstate Transit Climate Initiative. Other greatly polarizing issues which we worked closely with was a bill which sought to offer undocumented immigrants drivers licenses as well as the infamous lack of oversight within the RMV. In hindsight, the ability to work within fast paced and complex environments like the legislative office was one of the greatest learning experiences gained from this final coop. It created a sense of pressure and urgency to many of the positions duties which, even if they seemed simple at times, required strict attention to detail and management of multiple hard deadlines.

The greatest aspect of the final coop was the knowledge and guidance it gave me in terms of my career trajectory. Going into the coop I had a pretty good idea of what issues I wanted to address but was unsure what perspective or method would prove to be most rewarding for me to approach them from. While I had always enjoyed the ability of sociology to represent the complexity of groups of people, especially in dense environments like Boston, it seemed somewhat limited in methods within the field to address these issues. This is when I began to look into urban planning as a field. I was fortunate enough to have many projects which overlapped with the functions of the planning department and was quickly attracted to the kinds of solutions this discipline created to urban issues. Thanks to these relationships both within and between departments, I was able to secure another summer internship within the planning department and am now applying for the Masters in Urban Planning and Policy at Northeastern and hope to continue to work closely with MassDOT throughout my studies.

In concluding my final reflection, I can say that Northeastern delivered on its promises. The coop program was truly the greatest asset to my learning throughout my time here. It was definitely a process and each new iteration of the job search built on the knowledge gained from the previous one. At times it didn't always feel like forward momentum but that in of itself turned out to be a valuable lesson. More than anything it has made my labor valuable. I can walk confidently into interviews knowing that I have been there many times before and that what I state on my resume is backed by years of hard work and for that I am grateful to Northeastern and the Coop system.

I want to thank you as well Lisa. You were the kindest, most caring and supportive advisor a student could ask for. From the very first coop round where I felt pretty aimless to the final coop where I finally found my field you were always there with nuanced advice and kind words. I pretty often hear other students (outside our department of course) complaining that their advisors never listen, don't give them useful advice and make them feel like just another number in the Northeastern database, but I can very confidently say that I, nor any other sociology student has ever felt that way. So, thank you so much for the past 5 years of help and support, I really couldn't have done it without you.