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Organization: Off Campus Housing and Support Services (OCHSS)

Position: Program Assistant

Dates: July-December 2020

Co-op Reflection

(1) For my third co-op, I worked as a Program Assistant for Off Campus Housing and Support Services (OCHSS) at Northeastern and my position was \$17.65/hour. I think the job description mostly matched the job, although it had not been fully edited since COVID had broken out, so the section covering “office management” was not necessarily applicable. I also spent more time doing social media and marketing than I had initially anticipated based on the description.

(2) My primary responsibility on this co-op was advising students on off-campus related issues, which I did through email, phone, and virtual office hours on Zoom. Usually, inquiries over the phone or on Zoom were not too long, but towards the end of my co-op I did have some instances where I was advising students for 30 minutes or more. Although every staff member in the office did advising in some capacity, I definitely felt like my role was essential in making sure that emails and calls were returned as quickly as possible. As I got more comfortable with advising on more topics and complex issues, I was able to take on more student cases and review leases with more confidence. During the times when student inquiries were not as high in volume, I worked on a number of ad-hoc projects such as a video series on renter’s rights and creating marketing materials for various programs. In addition to advising, I also managed the office’s social media accounts both by scheduling and creating content, and I was in charge of most aspects of Breakfast Club, from volunteer coordination to packing supplies to communicating with the Community Ambassadors who ran the program on the day of. There were six Community Ambassadors when I was there, and I was responsible for communicating with them weekly and attending their staff meeting.

(6) The most challenging aspect of this co-op for me was balancing my advising responsibilities with other long and short term projects and being able to meet deadlines, especially during the weeks when the volume of student inquiries picked up dramatically. Also, because of the way certain programs fell during the week, my Fridays were usually very stressful because I needed to do all of the preparation for Breakfast Club in addition to answering emails and phone calls and holding virtual office hours on that day. Throughout the semester, I just learned how to manage my time better in terms of completing certain tasks earlier in the week in order to give myself enough time to finish everything by the end of the week.

(7) I think this co-op was a good way to learn what works for me in terms of being primarily remote and not being able to interact with my coworkers in person. While I had one supervisor on paper, many of my projects came from other staff members and therefore I was reporting to multiple people throughout my co-op. Additionally, I was managing multiple projects for most of the six months, so it was a good experience to learn how to manage my time effectively and without being in a physical work environment.

(8) I would say the most meaningful part of my co-op experience was being able to advise students, particularly on issues that were more serious or complex in nature. I have had previous experience in advising people over the phone and in advising students specifically, so I felt relatively prepared to do that as a large part of my job. However, there was a lot of information and small details I had to learn along the way such as how to get a security deposit back or the nuances of subletting apartments. Throughout my time at OCHSS, the staff were very helpful and responsive to any questions I had if I was unsure of certain answers.

(9) There were a couple of things I did on this co-op that I hadn't done before, one of which was managing social media accounts. Sometimes this only involved scheduling content that other people had created, and sometimes I was the one doing the content creation. There were a couple of people on the team that supported me with this process by suggesting ideas and reviewing posts before they went out. Had I been able to get on a consistent weekly schedule for the various social media tasks, I think I would have been a little bit less overwhelmed, but I usually would do the tasks throughout the week as they came up instead.

The most extensive project I had while at OCHSS was a video series that primarily focused on different aspects of renter's rights. I created slides for the videos using a software called Vyond, and also recorded the audio for some of the videos. This was a project I worked on for a few months because it took a while to come up with ideas for what the slides should look like and everything needed to be reviewed multiple times before being published. With both social media and the video project, I didn't have any previous experience doing that type of content creation, but I would say I was ultimately successful in both endeavors. I wouldn't necessarily want to accept a position that deals heavily with social media and marketing, but I think the experience was good to have in terms of developing additional skills.

(10) I did more interviews to secure this co-op than my previous two, which was partially due to the pandemic getting steadily worse as I was doing my co-op search. This was also the reason I eventually ended up abandoning my original ideas about types of positions I was interested in -- many of the co-ops I had previously bookmarked were canceled as the weeks went on. I'm glad this wasn't the first time I had interviewed for co-ops, otherwise I think I would have felt quite lost in the process. For students who are going on their first co-op, I think it is important to keep an open mind and not focus too heavily on the specifics of job descriptions because you can always set certain goals with a supervisor once you are hired for the role.

(13) While I was somewhat familiar with renter's rights and renting in Boston from a previous co-op, working at OCHSS definitely made me aware of things to look out for when doing an apartment search, signing a lease, communicating with landlords and many other aspects of being a tenant. For instance, I learned how to read leases very carefully and negotiate unfair or unnecessary clauses that could cause problems throughout tenancy. This information will be very helpful for me in future, in addition to all of the transferable skills I acquired through this position.

(Academic reflection question #1) During my co-op, I worked with a lot of students who had off campus issues related to the pandemic, whether it was due to finances, strict landlords, or something else. In the spring, many students were forced to return home due to the pandemic,

meaning that they were still paying rent without actually living in their apartments. In a lot of cases students were returning to other countries, which makes coming back to the U.S. more complicated, so I handled many cases where students were looking to get out of their leases. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to break a lease unless there is specific language that allows it, and that is still typically associated with large fees. We generally saw that even during the crisis, most landlords were not willing to let their tenants off the hook when it came to being on the lease and paying rent every month. Of course, this put some students in more of a hard place than others. There wasn't a whole lot our office could do besides be a good resource for students by laying out all of their options, which usually involved subletting or negotiating with the landlord based on what was in their lease. Through this co-op, I could definitely see how the pandemic and economic inequality was affecting Northeastern students, and how that also applied to all tenants in the city at large.