

Caroline Panchelli

Organization: Social Innovation Forum

Position: Program & Events Co-op

Dates: July-December 2019

Co-op Reflection

(1) For my second co-op, I was the Program & Events Co-op at the Social Innovation Forum (SIF), which is a nonprofit that helps to build the capacity of other small to midsize nonprofits in the greater Boston area. This is primarily done through their flagship Nonprofit Accelerator program, but there are a few other programs and events through which nonprofits can build their capacity as well. My position was stipended, which was different from my first co-op where I was paid hourly. I didn't find this to be a huge issue except for when I would stay late or work extra hours on event days, but my manager did her best to make sure the number of hours I worked per week was consistent. I think the NUCAREERS job description was accurate in what it said about my position. I found that there were some weeks where I was working very closely with the Program Team and some weeks where I was much more heavily focused on events, and that things didn't really start to pick up until the end of September.

(2) When I initially started, I was mostly reading applications to the Accelerator (we received over one hundred first-round applications in July, so it was quite a lot of reading) and working on smaller projects, a lot of which were in Salesforce. In the summer there weren't that many events, but that was when I was introduced to their expectations of event planning and logistics, which would become a big part of my job in the fall. My responsibilities definitely grew as I spent more time at SIF. From September to November, SIF holds evaluation and interview sessions for the Accelerator program, and there were seven of each, respectively. By October, I was the main person in charge of in-office events on top of the Program responsibilities I had. This involved sending emails, ordering food, printing name tags, and prepping rooms for each of the sessions. The weeks that had multiple sessions were the busiest weeks I had on co-op and it was typical for me to stay late during that time. Because I was the person overseeing these events, I felt like an integral part of the team, which is also why I felt the need to put in extra time to complete my work. SIF also has a condensed version of the Accelerator called Capacity Camp, which had weekly meetings at the office that I attended as well.

(5) One thing that surprised me about SIF is the size and scope of its network. For a small organization with about 10 full-time employees, their external network is quite large, with thousands of contacts from different sectors. While I was there, I met with a lot of nonprofit leaders, but also tons of people from the funding side and various social issue-area experts. The SIF model, which I found somewhat difficult to fully understand until I had been there for a couple of months, brings people together from many different types of work. This is something I didn't necessarily expect beforehand, but that I found very rewarding.

(6) I found that one of the most difficult aspects of my co-op was managing my time during the events season and towards the end of my time at SIF, when I was reporting to two different teams about various projects. There were times when the prep work I needed to do for evaluation or interview sessions would overlap across multiple events that were happening back-to-back. Throughout this time, I was supported by other SIF staff, particularly my manager, who

would offer to take on some of my tasks so that I could work on others. I definitely learned how to better manage my time from this experience.

(7) Though I was already comfortable with asking for additional work when things were so and for clarification on instructions if I needed it, I learned how to “manage up” to my supervisor in order to move my work along and to communicate with two different teams. All of the teams worked quite collaboratively at SIF, but there were times the teams I was working on would not be directly communicating with each other. I also got better with time management and prioritizing tasks when my workload was heavier.

(8) I really enjoyed working with the Nonprofit Accelerator, which took up the majority of my time on co-op. Because the selection process spanned the better part of the six months, it was especially rewarding when we finally chose the Social Innovators in December. SIF brought in a lot of issue-area experts during the evaluation period, so it was interesting to learn about nonprofit management and different social issues in Boston. When I started reading applications in July, I did feel underqualified to judge them because I didn’t really have any previous experience with nonprofits besides doing a few site visits when I was studying abroad. In the beginning, I asked a lot of questions and learned more about the Accelerator mostly through observation and sitting in on meetings with SIF staff.

(9) I also did not have any experience with event planning prior to this co-op, but I started off by mostly observing and then gradually gaining more responsibilities with events as time went on. I was supported mainly by my manager and two other people on the events and communications team. They were available to explain things to me in the beginning and to divide responsibilities for the more complicated events. Eventually I was able to run through the list of event prep tasks quite efficiently and without having to ask for assistance. It was also nice to be able to attend most of the events for which I planned the logistics.

(14) I am still unsure about what I want to do after graduation, but I am glad I got to gain exposure to the nonprofit sector and many other organizations and leaders within the sector. I feel like I got a good understanding of the nonprofit scene in Boston as well as the social issues that are currently having the most impact on its residents. I liked the indirect service aspect of SIF, and I know that if I wanted to go back to nonprofit work that is the type I would want to do. I also liked the program side of my job more than the events side, so I would be more open to a future position that dealt with programming than a position that had a focus on event planning.

(1) One of the social issue “tracks” SIF had for this year was related to disabilities, so I got to learn a lot about accessibility in Boston and how local organizations are trying to increase opportunities for people with disabilities. I also got to know an organization in New Bedford that works with the immigrant community there to advocate for worker’s rights, particularly with regard to wage theft and sexual assault. Doing a site visit there, where I met some of the workers the organization serves, was eye-opening in terms of being able to see how the immigrant community in New Bedford is directly affected by those issues.

There was a particular emphasis on prioritizing nonprofits that work in underserved communities, both from SIF and from the funders. Applicants were asked to think critically about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and this was used as a major criterion for the Accelerator. SIF was also undergoing its own DE&I work at the same time, so that was something that was on everyone’s minds. This drove home the importance of these values in nonprofit work, and forced me to think critically about my personal role within an organization as it relates to inclusivity.