

### **Oriana's Program and Special Events Co-op Reflection**

I was a Program and Special Events Co-op at the Social Innovation Forum (SIF) this past spring. The Social Innovation Forum is a 501(c)(3) capacity-building organization for Boston-area nonprofits. The SIF team is comprised of eight full-time employees, each of whom I had the opportunity to work closely with. I was on the Program Team headed by Tanya, Director of Programs. The other two Program Managers were Jenna and Sarah, my supervisor. On the Program Team, my primary responsibilities revolved around events. Thorough training at the beginning of my time there allowed me to quickly become capable of handling all of the logistics of events. I put together security lists and nametags, ordered from various caterers, created graphics, set up the event space, welcomed guests, and stayed alert to troubleshoot as needed. My favorite part of the co-op was that I always had enough tasks or projects on my plate to alternate working on. I still remember my interview and thought back to it at multiple points during my co-op. I had printed out the position description and highlighted the phrase, "interest in working in a fast-paced, event-heavy environment". When I was asked why I wanted the position, I read that line to them, emphasizing how excited I was at the prospect of being challenged to juggle multiple projects. While I had nonprofit experience and office experience, I had not had office experience in a nonprofit before and was hoping to get a better understanding of the programmatic and development side of nonprofit work.

I was on a stipend of \$12,000 for the six months, with paid time off and vacation days that accrued during my time there. While the benefits were good, two days into my co-op, I got an extreme feel for the caring office culture. My grandfather passed away on my first day and I had to request time off to fly out to the funeral. American work culture had conditioned me to be embarrassed to be using time off so soon after I started, but when I asked for the time off, I was shocked by the genuine sympathy and fact that time off for bereavement would not be taken out of my PTO. The office culture at SIF was a good balance of friendly, legitimate interest in each other as individuals without crossing personal boundaries. I always felt the line between work and social life to be pretty clear at the office. People felt free to talk about their partners, families, and lives, but conversations never crossed into questionable territory.

This co-op was full of new experiences and learning opportunities. I did not completely grasp the work that SIF does until I had already been there for a couple of weeks. The onboarding process was incredibly thorough and included detailed orientations for almost every program, process, or type of tech we were expected to know or use. Everyone was so welcoming and willing to help. When I started, "coffee chats" had already been scheduled on my calendar with every member of the team that I wasn't going to be working with directly. These chats allowed me to understand the organization through the eyes of each of the employees and get a glimpse of what everyone was working on. This sort of thoughtfulness and support extended to every aspect of my co-op. Every time a new project was introduced I was asked if I had the capacity for it and told who I could use as a resource if I would need support with any of it. For that reason, nothing was ever too daunting because regardless of how ambitious a task seemed, I felt comfortable knowing I had a support system and I was not afraid to ask for help. That being said, the hardest thing I probably had to do during my time at SIF was to prepare for six events in one week. Although I had been a part of many events in the past, I had never had as much responsibility in the process as I did with the Social Issue Talk Series. During my time at the office, my time was mostly split between working on events and completing various tasks independently at my desk.

The flexibility of the co-op allowed me to work with everyone in some capacity or another. Carolyn, Director of Network Engagement, brought me into meetings at the start of the creation of a collaborative funder track for civic engagement. We worked on editing the presentation together, and she taught me about the development side of SIF's work. Melissa, Director of Strategy and Operations, taught me and Kelsey, the Fundraising and Special Events Co-op, how to run the office. She told us the office was ours to manage for duration of our co-op. Melissa taught us how to order groceries for the kitchen, how to reorder office

supplies, when to water the office plants, and more. I worked with Kass, Communications and Events Coordinator, to create written and visual content for various platforms, such as our website, emails, and social media. This included tasks such as making graphics and writing for the SIF blog. Kass and I also worked together with Sarah to put on an eight-part Social Issue Talk Series (that was unfortunately cut short). My work never directly overlapped with Michelle's, Senior Coordinator of Strategy and Operations. Instead, our paths crossed during SIF's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work and as members of the "Tech Team". My time on the DEI Planning Committee was a highlight of my co-op. I looked to Michelle as a mentor and example of group facilitation, specifically around racial equity, which I had the opportunity to practice during DEI working group meetings.

Susan, SIF's Executive Director, proposed a research project to me and Kelsey in April. We spent our last couple of months at SIF researching other capacity-building organizations with similar philosophies around the world and chose ones to interview for this project. We spoke to the senior leadership of organizations in Miami, New Orleans, London, and Edinburgh, and researched organizations that did work globally. My co-op at SIF was my first, direct experience with a capacity-building organization. I didn't know much, if anything, about that type of intermediary work before I started at SIF. Interacting with different capacity-builders around the world was such a unique way of broadening my understanding of the scope of SIF's work and how we fit into that global context. There were fascinating differences in how organizations carried out their work depending on the structure of the government and culture of philanthropy in the country they were operating in. For example, in England, the government is the biggest funder of education charities, so a London-based organization we spoke to focused on building out their policy work. We presented our research to the whole team in late June and a recording of our presentation was shared with the board subsequently. Susan's encouragement and guidance made the project possible.

I, like many others this year, had to become accustomed to new technology during this pandemic. The "Tech Team" at SIF formed as we quickly adapted our main event into a virtual format. The Social Innovator Showcase was scheduled for May 18th at the State Room, giving us less than two months to adapt to a virtual format. The "Tech Team" was put together to select a platform (Zoom Webinar), run support, and train others. It also aided in the shift to remote work as the team started to rely heavily on Slack, Zoom, and Google Suites. Transitioning to Zoom leveled the playing field a bit in terms of power dynamics- even if it was just mentally for me. I always felt valued as a team member within the team, but whether it was imagined or real, I was slightly more restrained in external-facing events because of my age and position. On a Zoom screen, where all of our boxes were the same size and a chatbox offered a less intrusive way of making comments, I felt freer to contribute. Unfortunately, the trade-off was that I lost the ability to have side conversations and build one-on-one connections with people at events. The circumstances of the pandemic did not diminish the quality of my learning during this co-op, rather shifted it into new realms.

Networking is not the primary reason for any decision I make. However, the networking at the Social Innovation Forum, which was essentially a constant stream of socially conscious leaders and professionals coming in and out of my day-to-day, was incredible. The relationships I built were not only plentiful but sincere, too. I learned so much about the eight 2020 Social Innovators, their nonprofits, and social issue areas throughout my six months. OrigiNation and Elevated Thought seek to create community and culture through art. PAARI trains law enforcement to become resources for people struggling with opioid use disorders. Vital Village Network uses community education to support families. The 1647, Inc. engages both families and schools to endure student success. WHALE restores historical buildings to support vulnerable populations. Adaptive Sports New England creates space for people with disabilities to participate in sports. Boston HERC prepares first-generation students of color for college. I worked with each of those organizations' Executive Directors, giving valued feedback and creating materials for them. During our last meeting with the Innovators, I realized my impact was noticed and their thanks were genuine. Working with SIF and their portfolio organizations gave me an incredible insight into Boston's nonprofit sector that I don't think I could have gotten working with a direct-service organization.

This co-op taught me a lot about myself. I've learned that I prefer working in a position with a wide variety of tasks where I have the opportunity to meet new people frequently. I enjoyed having so many people in and out of the office and a lot of meetings to break up my time at my desk. Many tasks were tedious and boring, and I found that because I truly believed in SIF's mission and saw the value of every project, I undertook every assignment, boring or not, with enthusiasm. Having helped Sarah and Tanya select summer interns and then the fall co-op, I was able to see that among their hiring priorities was a deep passion for social change work- something that was essential to this co-op. My perspective of nonprofit work saw a shift as well during this co-op. The more I learned about SIF's work and the nonprofit organizations they work with, the more I realized how relevant my studies were. I took the Nonprofit Sector, Philanthropy, and Social Change course taught by Professor Riccio the semester before this co-op, and the timing could not have been better. Much of the course content was centered around successful nonprofit management, systems thinking, and philanthropy. The Social Innovation Forum's goal of helping nonprofits achieve sustainability and growth fit incredibly well into the academic path I've found myself on thus far. SIF also taught me about the world of nonprofit development and I've realized that I do not want to work with funders. I don't know what I want to do next or later on in life, but I do know I want to work for an organization with a positive social change mission I believe in like SIF.