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31 August 2016

Dear Dr. Porter and Dr. Makman,

I am writing to report on my summer 2016 internship with Rx for Reading Detroit, which was sponsored by the University of Michigan English Department. Rx for Reading is a non-profit organization, associated with the University of Detroit Mercy, that promotes literacy among children and youth in the city.

Over the approximately 12 weeks that I worked part-time for Rx for Reading, I completed three main projects. First, I provided new content for the organization's website, creating a bibliography of sources on children's literacy and writing short essays on different topics related to literacy. Although the website had previously contained links to articles giving parents advice for helping kids read, there was not a repository of research on the site. The executive director hoped that a section on research would both speak to a wider audience and give more credibility to the mission of Rx for Reading. This project required me to use many of the research skills I have developed as a PhD student, but it also allowed me to experiment with writing to a broader public, as I designed the essays to speak at once to scholars, parents, and leaders in the Detroit community. I also gained skills in simple web formatting and design for WordPress, since I was responsible for loading the essays onto the site.

The second and third projects I completed involved strengthening and expanding Rx for Reading's relationships with community partners. Over the past two years, Rx for Reading has donated about 15 Little Free Libraries to different community organizations serving youth in Detroit. In order to assess how these organizations were using the libraries, and to see if Rx for Reading could assist them in making the libraries more effective, I designed a survey and called or emailed each community partner to get their feedback. My other responsibility was to find homes for 10 of the new libraries Rx for Reading had ready to donate. To find potential locations, I researched programs in Detroit that might be a good fit, contacted the organizations and explained the initiative, and arranged logistics with those who were interested in receiving a library. I also designed an informational flyer, based partly on my research about literacy and partly on our survey feedback, that could be delivered with the libraries to help organizations use them more effectively.

Reaching out to community partners was an eye-opening experience. While my work within Rx for Reading taught me a lot about literacy and about how a literacy non-profit works, my contact with such a diverse range of places in Detroit also made me aware of the different missions and structures of many non-profits and similar organizations. I talked with leaders and directors of homeless shelters, community centers, churches, tutoring centers, and schools. With the blessing of the executive director, I also worked to diversify the types of community partners we worked with, and I ended up placing libraries in a hair and nail salon, a boxing gym, and a musical and sports program for youth. I learned how interdependent non-profit organizations are within a community.

I learned to think more creatively about how to incorporate literacy into the everyday lives of people. And I developed a number of practical skills essential for working with community partners unfamiliar with Rx for Reading, such as how to be persistent in making contact and how to pitch an initiative in the first thirty seconds of a cold call!

For my professional development as a PhD student, I found my work with Rx for Reading to be very rewarding. The internship added new dimensions to my understanding of reading and access to reading, which was a nice complement to my dissertation work on reading in Victorian studies. The experience allowed me to transfer skills from graduate school—including research, writing, and organizational skills—to a public setting, as well as to develop new skills. It also pushed me to think more critically about how academics can serve public communities, and what academics can learn from those communities. Although I am not sure whether I will work for a non-profit in the future, I am sure that the internship was a valuable experience for whatever future work I will do in the broad fields of writing, teaching, and communication.

As for the structure of the internship: I appreciated the flexible hours, and I appreciated that I could work with Rx for Reading to design an internship that worked for both me and them. Mary-Catherine Harrison, the executive director, was a supportive and inspiring mentor, and I would highly recommend this or a similar internship to future graduate students in the PhD program. Since to many graduate students an internship like this may be off the radar, I think it's important to create a public record of some kind of the internships PhD students have done, perhaps on the English Department website. Such a record would provide a sample to give students an idea of what is possible for them, and it would also legitimate the internships within the overall PhD program. (Incorporating the internships into orientation, as you are already doing, seems like a good start, too.)

Thank you very much for this opportunity!

Sincerely,

Christie Allen