Co-op Reflection Paper

What was your position and the organization you worked for on co-op?

For my second and final co-op, I was the Recruitment and Community Outreach Associate at The Fenway Institute (TFI) at Fenway Health. After looking back on the COOL description, I believe that the position was explained accurately and adequately provided me with the appropriate information in regards to the co-op tasks, duties, expectations, necessary skill sets, and desirable requirements. My co-op at TFI was paid ($14/hour) which was essential for me in order to cover basic necessities such as rent, utilities, transportation, etc. TFI is an interdisciplinary center for research, training, education, and policy development, that focuses on both national and international health issues (e.g., HIV research, STI prevention, transgender rights). On the other hand, TFI falls under the larger organization of Fenway Health, a community health center serving Boston neighborhoods, New England, and its LGBT community. Additionally, my co-op was not self-designed since the Recruitment co-op position has been an essential component to TFI’s Recruitment & Community Engagement Teams for the past few years.

How did you spend the majority of your time in co-op? Doing what? With whom?

Since my particular co-op position was based around the timelines of the various research protocols at TFI, my daily/weekly tasks shifted over the course of six months. However, primarily, I would communicate with participants over the phone or via email in order to coordinate dates/times for their screening appointments at Fenway Health or to conduct a prescreening survey over the phone. During the spring semester months, a large portion of my time would be visiting various Northeastern University public health and health sciences student clubs in order to give presentations on the current studies recruiting participants at TFI (along with other volunteer opportunities). Also, in the beginning of March, TFI was provided funding from two of the largest HIV networks, HPTN and HVTN, in order to conduct the AMP Study (Antibody Mediated Prevention). From March onwards, a good portion of my time and efforts would go towards recruiting/rescreening/scheduling AMP participants, tabling at various community engagement events, and prepping Fenway Health’s booth at Boston’s 2016 Pride Festival in order to focus on recruiting AMP participants. Throughout my entire co-op, I was definitely treated like an integral part of the Recruitment Team and consistently worked with Laura Michelson and Kathleen Bailey. Lastly, I would oftentimes collaborate with TFI’s Biomedical Research Team and various TFI RA’s.

Discuss what you learned about yourself and your work/learning style on your co-op?

Over the course of six months, I learned that I am dually an excellent team player, while also being able to work effectively and efficiently on my own. My supervisor’s managing style was not overbearing, however, she did offer structure and would provide me with direction as needed. I really appreciated being given a list of tasks on Monday morning and having the entire work week to independently manage my time and how I would like to balance completing various projects simultaneously. Prior to working at TFI, I was already a very organized person; however, after working at TFI, I learned how to be more flexible around shifting schedules when working in a group dynamic with various players.

Please describe the most exciting, meaningful, or interesting job, task, activity, etc. that you did during your co-op. Why was it exciting, meaningful, or interesting?

The most exciting task that I was given while working at TFI, was creating a “game show” activity for TFI to conduct at local colleges and universities in order to recruit participants for studies, teach safe sex/health practices, and also to advocate for Fenway Health and The Fenway Institute. After brainstorming with my Recruitment Team and the Community Engagement Coordinator, I created a game called the “Safer Sex Decathlon.” This task was very meaningful and fun for me to work on since I had to think of ways to make education surrounding safe sex and LGBT research interesting and fun to a college-age population. While creating the Safer Sex Decathlon, my best friend became the internet and I searched through Google in order to create 10 rounds of unique trivia games with great incentives as prizes (e.g., $100 gift card to Sweet Cheeks, vibrators, lube, condoms, etc.). Overall, since the Safer Sex Decathlon was extremely successful at a particular event at Boston University’s month of Frisky February, our team replicated it again at a UMass Lowell Valentine’s Day event.
Please describe a job, task, activity that you did during co-op that you had never done before.

While working at TFI, my supervisor was really trying to ramp up our Recruitment Team’s digital strategy and presence in order to recruit more participants from online campaigns and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Grindr, Adam&Adam, BBRT, Hornet). In order to assist her, I utilized the internet to research digital marketing companies, such as HubSpot and SurveyMonkey, to analyze the overall costs of subscribing to their services and how potentially beneficial these subscriptions could be to TFI and its research participant recruitment strategy. Initially, I felt nervous about doing this type of digital strategy researching since it was my first time, however, my Recruitment Team really worked as a unit and took the time and patience to help each other out by thoroughly talking through ideas and offering constructive feedback and useful suggestions. Overall, this task was successful since we were able to isolate which digital strategies would be most useful to our team and TFI in the upcoming months (i.e., Facebook Live and Shortstack), along with having improved our scope of knowledge surrounding the constantly changing and flourishing field of digital marketing.

Did any of your previous coursework help you be effective in this position?

While reflecting back, there were many courses that helped me in being effective and successful at this position at TFI: Counseling in Human Services (listening skills when speaking to participants), Community and Public Health (understanding the purpose of a FQHC and its role in society), Epidemiology/African Diaspora (foundation for HIV/AIDS research), Ethnic Relations & Cultural Identity (working with diverse populations), Research Methods in Human Services (understanding various types of research methods and terms, e.g., IRB, double-blinded study, placebo), Sexual Orientation & Gender Expression (foundation for working with LGBTQ+ target populations), and Race/Ethnicity/Health in the US (foundation for understanding why health disparities exist and how to mitigate them). Secondly, this co-op experience at TFI will be extremely helpful for my next semester’s courses since I will be enrolled in Alternative Medicine and Health Care Research.

How did your co-op experience affect you?

This co-op experience has changed my attitude surrounding research in general. Prior to working at TFI, I believed that the majority of research would be dull and conducted in a lab or in various forms of literature. However, working at TFI has broadened my understanding of “research” and provided me with an introduction to an array of different types of research, such as, epidemiological, behavioral, biomedical, clinical, and more. I have been exposed to many processes involved in research, such as recruiting participants, working to achieve IRB approval for recruitment language, tracking participant data, organizing community engagement events, and upholding a consistent standard of cultural competency and respect among community members.

Did this co-op help you decide what you want to do next (in terms of career or work)? Any plans?

Yes, this co-op definitely helped me solidify my future goal to pursue a dual MPH (Masters of Public Health) and MSW (Masters of Social Work) degree. Throughout my time at TFI, I was able to have informational interviews with several key staff members, network with other professionals in the field of community and public health, and also enhance my current knowledge surrounding health disparities and how to achieve health equity in the long run.

INEQUALITY –

My co-op experience at TFI helped me to better understand the historical context of HIV/AIDS and the current inequality that exists within the realm of HIV/AIDS. I was introduced to organizations such as AIDS Action Committee (AAC) and the Multicultural AIDS Coalition (MAC) which also focuses on HIV and STI prevention, oftentimes, specifically for men who have sex with men (MSM) who identify as gay or bisexual. Currently, the latter population has the highest rates of HIV acquisition in the US. My time at Fenway Health helped me to improve my knowledge surrounding the intricacies of intersectionality, and how structural, social, and cultural factors can all have an impact and influence an individual’s health status.