

Internship with the
Women's Institute for Housing
and Economic Development

Final Project

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Table of Contents

1. Definition of the Problem
2. Project Goals
3. Description of the Project
4. Methods
5. Results
6. Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations
7. Appendix

Log of Visits to the Women's Institute
Project Updates from Computer Network

The Women's Institute
Description of Organization and Services
Five-Year Strategic Plan

Casa Myrna Vazquez
Application for Emergency Shelter Grants
Application for the Lend Loan Program
Development Package

WINGS
Program Profile
Grant Material
Application to the Federal Home Loan Bank

1. Definition of the "Problem"

Throughout my working life, I had been unable to break into the nonprofit housing development community. It was my impression, from many interviews and conversations, that being relatively bright and enthusiastic was not enough to be allowed "in". Employers were looking for workers specifically trained in housing development or related endeavors, hopefully in the corporate sector, and willing to work for low wages doing similar work. One reason I pursued a degree in Community Economic Development was for training in those "specific skills" that my resume could not yet claim. In this way, I could return to the nonprofit housing development community and show my training and background in just those skills they were seeking.

With this in mind, I undertook an internship with the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development. The Women's Institute contracts out to local nonprofit organizations to provide technical assistance in real estate, program, and business development. By working with them, I would gain first hand experience doing tasks I was hoping to do in the paid workforce.

My employment during this time was not conducive to an appropriate project and my boss was not receptive to my school program. However, my job did leave me a certain amount of flexibility to put in several hours per week on an unrelated task, (unbeknownst to my employer).

Lynn, at the Women's Institute, took me under her wing.

Although I was put to work on a particular project, I was essentially to help out on whatever she needed me to do. In this way, I would get a clear sense of the variety of activities necessary to make a housing project move forward and hopefully succeed. We did draft a general list of activities I would work on, however, to ensure that I would cover the areas I was specifically interested in.

2. Project Goals

As stated in my project contract, these were some of the specific things I wanted to do during my internship:

- A. Prepare applications and packages for government funding.
- B. Secure funding from many different sources.
- C. Network with relevant resources around Boston: other nonprofit groups, funders, contractors, the City and its many departments, etc.
- D. Become familiar with the various zoning and code issues affecting a project. Learn how to maneuver within the City (applications, variances, etc.) in order to keep a project moving forward.
- E. Financing issues: put together proformas, estimates, and budgets. Learn how to work and rework the finance puzzle.
- F. Successfully negotiate with owners so that the deal goes through with as much benefit to our organization as possible.
- G. Define and oversee actual rehab of the property, working with contractors, inspectors, and vendors.
- H. If appropriate and depending on time frame, to work with client on programmatic components of project. (My internship was with the Women's Institute, which had been hired by the client to do housing-related tasks; this was different than actually working with client on programmatic components.)

3. Description of Project

My internship with the Women's Institute was broken up into two parts. I worked for Casa Myrna Vazquez (CMV) on a transitional housing project for pregnant, homeless, battered teenagers. CMV is a well-established, sophisticated organization with good access to financial resources. It has been very successful at its undertakings and is respected in the community.

During my work for CMV, I unknowingly shared confidential information. Because of this mistake, all those involved were better off if I did not continue to work for CMV.

I then went to work for WINGS, the Women's Institute for New Growth and Support. WINGS is organizational antithesis of CMV: they are young and inexperienced, with very limited financial resources. WINGS works to house and help women recovering from addiction. Compared to CMV's staff of 25, WINGS has one part-time staff member who provides assistance to women in the community.

For me, the opportunity to work with such different organizations enhanced my learning process significantly. In retrospect, because of CMV's sophistication, I was treated almost as a non-person. From my perspective, it seemed as though they were used to having help from so many volunteers, that they did not feel the need to appreciate the particular efforts of any one individual. The women at WINGS, in their stage of struggling, were grateful of everyone's help. They thanked me for my work and this made a difference to me.

Although I did similar tasks for the two organizations, I had an interesting opportunity with WINGS which I was not expecting. Given their stage of development, my help was more useful organizationally. Barbara, who was running the Program Committee, needed to develop some basic business skills: filing information, organizing the workload and establishing priorities, setting up and conducting meetings, delegating assignments, etc.

Much of my efforts working with Barbara did not show up on my project contract. Nonetheless, the lesson here was critical for this type of work: In developing nonprofit housing, lots of different tasks must be undertaken simultaneously; and they may not be planned for. Another important lesson which is worth repeating is the need to meet folks where they're at: If Barbara is carrying all her papers around in a big box, she will probably not be in a position to meet with the City and explain how much funding she is seeking and why.

4. Methods

One of my objectives was to make my internship work within the confines of my job. By working as a property manager for nonprofit organizations, I had the luxury of very little supervision and a non-demanding work load. I had to be available to tenants during most of the day, but my time was my own.

Under this scenario, I was available to work on tasks from my office; no one was the wiser. I would leave my office to meet with Lynn during the day. We would go over work and I would

return to my office with new tasks to complete. In addition to meeting with Lynn at her office, I would also do other activities: go to the building department or on other errands, or go to meetings with the client, the City, or contractors.

The structure of my internship proved very useful. The less time I spent away from my office, the better. And the Women's Institute did not have the physical space for me to work in that office. I kept a log of my meetings with Lynn and other activities, which I have included in the appendix. I have also included in the appendix copies of my monthly project updates and proposals I worked on during the year.

5. Results

In putting together my thoughts and reviewing the past year of my work with Lynn, I realize that I have accomplished quite a lot, even though this doesn't always "feel" true. Comparing what I set out to learn and what I actually did turned out to be very rewarding.

I spent the bulk of my time preparing applications for government funding. This entailed both writing and research. As a component of this activity, I had to obtain a variety of information from around the city: results of studies, statistics, cost estimates, maps and other reference material, etc. This helped me to learn a bit about the important (or at least necessary) resources, relevant players, and some of the personalities I may encounter in the future.

Much of the work to complete government applications was a matter of meeting deadlines. I found it terribly frustrating to chase after meager dollars in stiff competition with other worthy groups. But this is how the system works; so it was a valuable lesson to learn. Because we were typically working under time pressures, it was difficult to step back and plan to pursue private funding sources. However, much of the work I was doing was easily converted to proposals for private funders.

In the process of preparing government applications, I learned about zoning and building code issues -- parking requirements, buried oil tanks, and lead-based paint are just some examples.

I was also able to attend several meetings: with Casa Myrna Vazquez and WINGS, with building owners, staff members from the Department of Public Works, the Public Facilities Department, and Economic Office of Communities and Development. I was glad that my internship and Lynn provided this opportunity. I would have benefitted from going to more meetings, I think, but my job constraints made this difficult. Lynn had to move her projects forward, whether I was available or not.

In preparing government packages, it was disappointing to see that the process appeared deliberately convoluted, staff workers seemed deliberately unhelpful and indirect. Almost by definition, the process drains energy: strict deadlines are established by the government body and then not honored by them. It is typical to have two or three days to provide information

that is then held up for four to six months or longer. I would suggest that the work itself is not terribly complicated or difficult. Much of the material prepared for one application can be easily altered to use for a different program.

In retrospect, I wish I had done more on the financing side of the two projects I worked on. Lynn was very willing to share "the numbers" with me, though this wasn't the same as working out the numbers myself. I wish I felt more comfortable now in developing proformas and budgets, though I still feel fairly nervous about my capabilities.

Given the timing for the two projects, I did not get to do either of the last two items of my project contract. Rehabilitation of the properties was not going to begin during my school program. This was not so much of a problem for me because I have worked for a private developer building new houses. Although new construction and rehab are quite different, I was not especially disappointed to miss out on this piece of my internship. Further, as I expected, I did not have the opportunity to work on any programmatic components of either project; though I did get to work on a resident manual for the WINGS Living and Learning Center. In hindsight, I'm not sure how appropriate it would have been for me to do programmatic work with clients, given my position as a part-time intern for the Women's Institute.

6. Analysis/Conclusions/Recommendations

I believe that my project has been successful. In retrospect, the most critical factor of this success was my mentor, Lynn. Lynn understood what I wanted to learn and she was consistently attentive to meeting that need. She also understood and respected my constraints, both time and physical. Our communication was direct and straightforward. I don't know how to advise someone in seeking out a mentor who is of Lynn's caliber, though I would suggest that this is an important factor in the success of any internship.

From Lynn's perspective, any work which I completed was a task that she did not have to do. If I committed to a task, I completed it to the best of my ability, which is another important component to establishing one's credibility and reliability.

The downside to my internship was that I always felt as though I should be doing more work, putting in more time. Given my constraints, there were weeks I could not do any work, and this was frustrating. However, as I look over the material I did complete or at least worked on, perhaps I am being overly hard on myself.

Again in hindsight, I wish I had participated in more of a variety of activities. The bulk of my efforts working to obtain government funding, was a repetitive, time-consuming task. Once an application was submitted, there was typically no new information about it for the duration of my internship. I would

have gained a lot by working on proformas and budgets, which would have been appropriate and which I could have done.

In general, I was working on specific tasks as they came up; there wasn't always the ability to work on whatever I wanted to. This fact was malleable, but only to a limited extent. Combined with my time constraints, that I was not always available, I was further limited in the activities I could participate in.

My recommendations for other students seeking to gain experience of this kind are to:

- A. Find an organization doing the actual work one is interested in;
- B. Make sure to have a mentor who is accessible and understands the goals being pursued;
- C. Make sure the goals and objectives are clear in one's mind and are shared with, understood, and agreed to by one's mentor;
- D. Keep tabs on the goals and objectives throughout the process; make sure they are being addressed and hopefully met on a regular basis;
- E. Be honest with one's mentor; ask for feedback and take criticism in the vein it is intended.

I was very fortunate to have all of these things with Lynn, for which I am grateful. I think this is why I have come away from my internship with such a positive feeling.

7. Appendix

The following appendix is provided to give a sampling of the work I participated in. Although I did more than funding proposals and packages, these were the easiest pieces to include.