

A FIELDWORK TALE

Lucas Jaeger was a student in the Fieldwork course during the spring 2023. His write-up of one of his learning goals offers some important insights about the experience of being an intern. He offers some tips for being an “effective” intern when you are in a new organization you don’t know much about, you’re not sure how your skills might come into play, and you really want to feel like you’ve made a mark. While Lucas writes about the experience of interning in a non-profit, the lessons he draws out apply across the board. Enjoy his essay.

Effectively Interning for Non-Profit Organization

This semester, I interned with the [Porch Light program within Mural Arts Philadelphia](#). I had never worked for a non-profit organization before this, and I didn’t fully know what to expect. I know that at previous jobs (sushi restaurant, camp counselor, teaching assistant), I’ve made myself useful in many ways; *I found where more work was needed and put effort in there*. That strategy, I learned, works for a non-profit internship as well.

What can I do for the organization?

In our first conversation, my supervisor at Porchlight for the semester didn’t give me much direction. She mentioned a few projects that I could work on, but none were urgent, so I wondered how I could help the organization effectively. I was also concerned about how I would fit into spaces where Porch Light, a program that works with people facing economic insecurity and homelessness, operates. I would be an outsider to most of the community spaces that I’d be entering. I’d be younger and more privileged than everyone in these spaces, and while I’ve been in spaces like that before, I’ve never been an employee. Overall, I knew from the start that I’d be able to work hard for Mural Arts, but I was worried about exactly how I’d fit in and help the organization effectively.

Finding where the work was needed:

Over the course of the semester, I worked on a wide selection of projects. I noted that Porch Light, like other Mural Arts departments, could be better organized logistically. I found that many of their projects were not listed anywhere. Projects were approved, paid for, created, and dedicated but after that, there was no record of them as a part of Porch Light. With that in mind, I started by compiling all the Porch Light projects over the past decade and a half into a database on Google Sheets. I have a high proficiency in spreadsheets, and I felt comfortable doing this work, but it also was new for me to work with this kind of data. Even after I thought I had finished this project, I saw a photo of the mural in the main Mural Arts office and realized that it was a Porch Light project that I had never added to my database. So I decided I needed to audit the Porch Light website and fill in a lot of missing and outdated information.

My next project was to find and hire a web designer who could update the website. Over the course of a few weeks, the director of the web design company BoomTown and I had several conversations and we finally nailed down a contract to redesign the Porch Light website, a project that will be completed over the summer. To prepare for the designer to tackle the website, I audited all the pages on the Mural Arts website related to Porch Light. I went through and found outdated information and links and met with the directors of various Mural Arts locations and projects to fix their webpages.

Throughout these projects, I helped with programming in other aspects of the Porch Light program. I attended paint days at two locations through [Color Me Back](#), a same-day-pay program where people facing housing insecurity could come and paint for four hours and be paid \$50. As expected, I was a bit of an outsider in these spaces, but I learned to just ask people for their stories and listen closely. Everybody has a tale to tell, and they just need someone who will listen. At one point, I realized that I was hearing about a guy's high-school basketball glory days a second time after having talked to him a month before. It didn't matter; he just needed someone to talk to. I attended a General Board Meeting, a project design session, and a community outreach meeting. I learned the ins and outs of the Porch Light program, but more importantly, I learned what it means to effectively intern for a non-profit organization.

Measuring My Impact:

For a while, I wasn't sure if the work that I was doing was helpful. I was barely interacting with anyone other than my supervisor and participants at the Color Me Back paint days. My supervisor told me that my work was invaluable to the organization, but it was mostly work that felt unnecessary, and I hadn't even been asked to share the database or the audits with anyone yet. It wasn't until the first time I met some other people within the organization that I realized how important my work was. I met with the director of Color Me Back, who immediately thanked me for the work that I was doing for the organization. The same thing happened the next week when I met with the director of another Porch Light location. Apparently, this work, the database, the audit, the web design, has been needed for almost a decade, but there hadn't been anybody on staff who was able to commit fifteen hours a week to making these solutions into realities.

I also realized that I was having more meaningful conversations with people at the Color Me Back sites than any of the other Mural Arts staff members. There was just too much to be done by the staff members for them to be able to hold real conversations during the four hours, even though it was clear that these conversations were what mattered most to the participants. I slowly concluded that this is why interns for non-profits are so important. As an intern, you can do the work that needs to be done, but that nobody else is able to do. You can find the projects that every other member of the organization has put on the back burner, because usually, those quality of life changes have a large impact on efficiency. Now, it takes forty-five seconds instead of two hours of searching for a Porch Light staff member to list of all their projects related to immigration. Now, a Philadelphian who wants to know where to find Color Me Back in Kensington, will see the address listed first on the website, instead of buried in the "About" page. Non-profits, often understaffed and service-oriented, tend to let logistics and organization fall to the side. The websites become outdated, and information is hard to find. As an intern working for a non-profit, there will be an abundance of opportunities to find these projects and create solutions. The work isn't usually that difficult, it just isn't urgent, but completing it well will reward you with gratitude throughout the organization.

Lessons learned:

Just by saying yes to opportunities that arise, whether they're fun trips or odd jobs, will lead to great experience for the future and a network of individuals who are thankful for your work. As an intern, there is also time for the more interesting parts of any job. I got to paint a few

times, something that most of the staff at Mural Arts rarely get to do. I got to have those deep conversations with participants at Color Me Back while the staff workers were dealing with logistics. It's important as an intern to take advantage of your position and do the work that higher-ups don't have the time to do. I learned over the course of the semester that this is the way to effectively intern at a non-profit. Take on the work that nobody has the time to do, whether it's the quality of life work that will reward you with connections and praise or the fun, personal work that will be rewarding within itself. Just embrace the directionless-ness of it all and say yes to every opportunity; that's what being an intern is all about.

In the future, I expect to find myself working for a variety of non-profit organizations. I hope that some of this time will be as an intern, as I have learned that this is how you gain the most experience. I think that I will become more comfortable holding conversations with strangers over time, and I'm excited to spend more time with a variety of people. I would like to learn more about working in policy, and I'm excited to be a general intern in a political office this summer so that I can embark on this same process again. I expect to find the tasks that were put on the back burner.