This semester, I have worked with PublicStuff as a Development Intern. PublicStuff is a tech startup that makes software used by local city governments as a way of enabling and improving civic engagement. They do this by providing customized and easy-to-use mobile and web applications that can be used by the citizens of the municipalities with which they have partnerships to submit and track public works requests to the local governments. They also provide a government-facing application that allows the local governments to manage these public works requests. Additionally, their software provides the option for local governments to create other useful widgets within their applications, such as links to a city calendar or other useful city websites.

Much of my work for the company has revolved around the development of one of those widget types—specifically, an RSS feed reader that city governments can put on their application. The company had been hearing from multiple clients that they wished their application to include a widget that nicely displayed an RSS feed of their choosing, whether it be a local news source or a city event feed. My supervisor felt that this would be an appropriate project for me to work on, and over the course of a few weeks, I managed to create the feed reader from scratch. It is able to read RSS feeds from essentially any source (provided it is in valid RSS format), and displays these feeds within working PublicStuff applications currently being used by citizens and government officials. While creating the feed reader, I needed to consult other engineers on the team, in order to better understand how the reader would fit into the existing application framework, how to implement the reader to retain consistency with the company’s coding.
standards, etc. This process not only allowed me to become more familiar with PublicStuff’s software structure and with the ways to scale web/mobile applications in general, but it also strengthened my relationships with others on the development team, and gave me general experience developing software as part of a team. The project also forced me to do research on my own (in order to understand and implement the Google Feeds API), and present what I found to my supervisor, as he had not had any experience with the interface I was implementing. Apart from this project, I worked to create a functionality for the applications that allows citizens to submit public works request by email. This also required me to work with other engineers on the team, as well as research and implement a software that had never been used by the company, giving me valuable experience in figuring out how to integrate an outside interface into the company’s pre-existing application framework.

In general, my internship has helped me further my interest in computer science. Though I have learned many interesting and important things in my computer science courses at Columbia, they have generally been focused on foundational and theoretical knowledge, and have not provided as much of a practical focus. Working at PublicStuff, not only have I gained an experience with web development that I had not gotten in the classroom, I also learned more broadly about the practical considerations of actually implementing some of the concepts I have learned about in my courses. That is, I have seen first hand what it takes to bring the foundational concepts I learned in class to fruition—to make useful and scalable software. This sort of practical knowledge is something that I will certainly use going forward: both on my own, to further my
independent web development projects; and hopefully with future employers, to ease my integration into a new team and development stack.

This internship was my first experience in a startup (in fact, it was one of my first experiences working in an office, in general), and it allowed me to get a feel for the work environment. I enjoyed the laid back atmosphere in my office—the open layout, informal communication, frequent joking, music, etc.—as well as the company’s small size. I felt like, very quickly, I have become familiar with many of the people at the company, and I felt welcomed at the office from the beginning. Indeed, I can easily see myself working at a startup similar to PublicStuff in the future—I think that both the informal culture, as well as the communication required between different teams in the company, i.e., the need to think more broadly about the product rather than just one’s particular role in the organization, align with my strengths and my interests.

Overall, my experience with PublicStuff, as part of the SIP program, has been both an enjoyable and educational one. It has helped me to develop valuable technical skills and exposure to the web development industry, and it has given me experience working individually and as part of a team, as well as an introduction to what it’s like working at a tech startup. In doing so, I think my internship has helped to prepare me for my future career, by both helping me hone my skills and also direct my interests.