Virtual Internship Program Reflection

Interning for BPeace was an incredible learning experience, and was one of the most rewarding things that I did this past school year. Throughout my time with the organization I was challenged in many ways, pushed outside of my comfort zone, and subject to many tribulations. Despite the difficulties that I faced, I feel that I ultimately came out ahead and was able to develop new skills and gain new insights.

In terms of skills, the two areas where I developed the most were research and communication, and their development went hand in hand. As a research Intern, my primary responsibility was to find companies that could serve as hosts for a group of foreign entrepreneurs who were travelling to the US for a BPeace sponsored program. My research spanned many different industries that I was unfamiliar with, including vitamin production, wholesale bread baking, food packaging, digital advertising, furniture manufacturing and many others. Alongside being unfamiliar with these industries, there were often research restrictions on the location and size of a company that made finding suitable hosts even more difficult. All of this made my first couple of assignments seems incredibly tedious, and it would often take me days just to complete one. However, throughout the process of trial and error I picked up many valuable research skills that turned 5-hour assignments into 2 or 3. I learned how to navigate through LinkedIn to find companies and industry groups. I learned how to make use of resources, such as industry-specific periodicals, trade-show listings, and newspaper articles to find new search avenues. And most importantly I learned the value of picking up the
phone and calling someone to find information that simply wasn’t available online, or to ask questions on an industry aspect that I was having trouble understanding.

Realizing the usefulness of calling was especially profound for me, seeing how my generation seems to value direct contact less and less, and also how it encouraged me to develop my communication skills. I became better at adjusting my tone and speaking style to match the person I was talking to. I became better at clearly expressing what Bpeace was seeking to accomplish. I learned how to form concise questions that would yield clear answers. And I also learned how to ask for additional contacts and how to set up follow-ups.

In addition to research and communication skills, this internship provided me with two important insights that will help me in the future. For one, I was able to see firsthand the value of an extensive network through working with my boss Marla. She is perhaps the most well connected person I have ever met, and I was able to see how her network helped her to facilitate collaborations, find information, and form new connections. Also, through using her LinkedIn for a project, I was able to see just how expansive a network can be in terms of third and fourth tier connections. Even though Marla’s work experience was almost entirely in consulting, she was still able to share many second tier connections with people in industries such as industrial cleaning and bread baking. These surprisingly obscure connections became essential for the implementation of two or more of our projects.

Along with networking, I was also able to gain insight into the struggles facing entrepreneurs in developing countries. Through working with people like Jamshid Sultanzada, an entrepreneur in Afghanistan who wants to start his own
fleet tracking business, I was able to see how there were local barriers to entry, such as stringent contracts, lack of local industry information and technological barriers that aren’t always present within the U.S. Moreover, I was also able to see how alongside these barriers, there also exist real world concerns that can make business a secondary priority. In one case, an entrepreneur that I was working with had to slow down his project because his town's only water well shutdown, thus requiring him to walk a mile everyday just to secure water for his family. Hearing of such a story gave me much more respect for the developing world, and also gave me a greater appreciation for the advantages we have in America.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, I found my internship with BPeace to be an incredibly rewarding experience, and I am excited to announce that I will be continuing my internship into the last part of the semester and potentially into the summer. Thanks so much to the Virtual Internship Program for offering me this amazing opportunity and you will be likely to see me apply again next year for either the Virtual Internship Program or the Startup Internship Program.