

John Haak

2018 Sillerman Fellow

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation

Sillerman Fellow Reflection Paper

I interned at the [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](#) during the summer of 2018 as a Sillerman Fellow. I was interested in the Sillerman Fellowship because of my background in fundraising. Prior to coming to Heller, I was the Manager of Foundation Relations at Cradles to Crayons in Brighton, MA. I applied to the fellowship because I wanted to see the other side of philanthropy and understand how funding decisions are made at foundations. Further, Sillerman intrigued me because of its focus on social justice philanthropy. I wanted to learn how to apply a social justice lens to philanthropy, ensuring that donations addressed root causes and systemic issues rather than the symptoms.

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation funds nonprofit organizations working for an equitable food system in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Maine through its Healthy Food Fund. The Foundation also has a robust employee service and giving program that provides opportunities for Harvard Pilgrim Health Care employees to give back to local community organizations financially and with volunteer hours. Recently, the Foundation went through a new strategic planning process that aligned these two interests by focusing future giving on volunteer-powered food justice organizations.

My primary responsibilities as an intern for the foundation was to research volunteer-powered food justice organizations and to draft a new request for proposals (RFP) for the Foundation based on the strategic plan. The research portion of the job was mostly web-based, using various nonprofit databases and networks to identify organizations that might fit the Foundation's funding criteria. This research helped me understand the landscape of food justice work in New England and led to thought-provoking questions and discussions for the Foundation regarding the types of organizations they wished to fund.

Drafting the RFP was the most rewarding, and challenging, part of my internship. Not only did I gain a new skill by learning how to write these kinds of documents, but it also made me an active part of the decision-making process regarding the kinds of organizations the Foundation wished to fund in terms of staff size, budget, and programmatic activities. At the same time, drafting the RFP became difficult because decisions were made as I was writing. Criteria that I thought had been finalized was sometimes revisited, ultimately leading to redrafting. Still, being a part of these discussions and understanding the rationale behind the decisions was an invaluable experience. I now feel confident in my ability to draft an RFP.

In addition to my work related to the RFP, I also researched policy databases and assisted in drafting the Foundation's FY2019 budget. The Foundation wants to become more active in food justice policy and advocacy. My role over the summer was to identify databases, listservs, and professional networks that would help the Foundation discover what policies it should advocate for and at what level. I enjoyed this aspect of the internship because I had the opportunity to speak with food policy experts and learn about how they lobby state and local governments. I asked to work on the budget process because I wanted to continue to work on my financial skills over the summer. As a dual degree Master of Public Policy / Master of Business Administration candidate, I hope to use a mixture of business and policy skills in my next job. Inputting financial data into a spreadsheet was not a highlight, but I appreciated listening in on leadership discuss which line items needed additional funding and why.

I was also given opportunities to learn about other roles at Harvard Pilgrim inside and outside of the Foundation. I spoke with every member the Foundation team and learned about what they did in their role, how they came to their position, and what they felt were the most rewarding and challenging aspects of their job. My supervisor went out of his way to introduce me to senior leaders in other Harvard Pilgrim departments. I was able to talk to the head of Diversity and Inclusion, market managers, and members of product development and marketing about their roles and career paths.

My work this summer was challenging and enjoyable. I was able to gain a better understanding of how philanthropic decisions are made while learning new skills I can use going forward. I appreciate the Sillerman Center and Heller staff for helping me find this internship and supporting me over the summer. I am grateful to the Harvard Pilgrim for welcoming me to their team and providing work opportunities that taught me new skills and made a positive impact for the Foundation.