Greetings Mr. Skowronski and the Harvard Club of Southern Connecticut,

My name is Chloe Shawah, and thanks to the Harvard Club of Southern Connecticut’s Summer Community Service Fellowship, I was able to spend ten wonderful weeks working full-time at Leadership, Education and Athletics in Partnership (LEAP) in New Haven.

LEAP is a non-profit organization that provides educational summer and after-school programming for the five most underserved neighborhoods of New Haven. I wanted to work at LEAP because I am very passionate about equal educational opportunity for all children and youth, and also wanted to learn about working in the non-profit sector. When I reached out to Rachel Kline Brown, LEAP’s Director of Development, we agreed that my work at LEAP would be a mix of three major components: 1. Helping the development office with their ongoing work, 2. Pursuing my own projects within the development office, and 3. Working with the children in the LEAP Computer Learning Center (CLC). We agreed that this would provide a perfect mix of me being one of the service to the organization while at the same time engaging my academic interests of math and computer science.

The Development Office also had another summer fellow, a rising senior at Yale, and I can honestly say that having her there had an incredibly positive impact on my experience. About a third of our work overlapped, so we had projects we shared and collaborated on as well as projects that were entirely our own.

Our first day at LEAP, Rachel gave us a mountain of LEAP brochures, grant applications, press releases, and other publications to read... for 8 hours. We were daunted to say the least, but just from that first day, I learned all the details about LEAP’s programming, caught a glimpse of the tedious and time consuming process of applying for grants, and saw the incredible amount of work that went into the fundraising process.

After our rapid orientation, we jumped into our projects. To help the development office with their ongoing work, I was creating social media posts, taking pictures of children’s programming and collecting testimonials, and making calls to donors for LEAP’s Summer Appeal. These duties were largely shared with my cointern and I feel that we were able to share the responsibilities fairly and truly enjoyed working together. I’ll be honest, the task of making phone calls to ask for donations was mortifying at first, but I feel like I learned a new degree of professionalism and the unfortunate realities of the nonprofit sector.

For my own projects within the development office, I was in charge of making website changes to make it more comprehensive (you can view the website at www.leapforkids.org — it still does not look beautiful, but I promise that it is much better than before!). I was also in charge of designing a mailing about Planned Giving (also mortifying at first, but a reality), which included researching different types of planned giving options, finding the simplest and cleanest language to convey those options, and coming up with the most empowering way to deliver that information to donors. I designed a set of three overlapping card inserts that were actually printed and mailed to LEAP’s most consistent donors! I also got to practice my spreadsheet skills by accessing LEAP’s donor database and comparing queries to create lists of potential donors who had not yet contributed their usual amount for the year, or donors whose donation amounts had been increasing and could possibly be willing to become further involved. Finally, my most favorite project of all was that I was tasked with creating an annual report for LEAP (they had not generated an annual report since about 2013). I was absolutely in love with this project for a few reasons: I was given lots of autonomy in creating a full report from scratch, LEAP was trying to describe their impact in a data-centric manner so I was able to put my applied math and data visualization skills to work, and I was able to design the report’s colors, fonts, photos, etc., from the ground up, really enjoyed and hope to be able to incorporate
Hannah, in teaching the kids about coding, cryptography, robotics, and other exciting STEM fields. I am very passionate about STEM education, especially for young girls, and the LCLC quenched my desire to be hands-on and actually work with LEAP kids, which was absolutely wonderful and memorable. I’ll share my favorite anecdote from the LCLC: Hannah came up with the most brilliant lesson plans to demonstrate difficult computer science concepts in a way that didn’t feel like a lecture. To convey to the kids that coding is difficult because it must be completely unambiguous and absolutely literal, Hannah had one of her teaching assistants, Paris, stand in front of the room and act as a robot. The girls (this was a class of girls) had to “code” Paris by telling him step-by-step instructions to wrap a present (he had all the materials in front of him). At first, the kids assumed this would be super easy and didn’t quite get why they were asked to do something so simple. The first thing they said was “Well, first, unroll the wrapping paper.” Paris then dramatically took a deep breath, grabbed the edge of the wrapping paper, and unfurled the entire roll across the room in one fell swoop. “There, I unrolled it!” he said. The look on the girls’ faces was priceless and their jaws fell to the floor. I had so much fun working with the kids, and was lucky enough to work with them for an hour a day, every day, which was a wonderful and refreshing break from my office duties.

My concern and I were also so privileged to have the entire LEAP office, not just the development office, treat us like full-fledged staff members. This meant that we greeted donors/people of importance as representatives from LEAP, we emailed and called third parties on behalf of the whole organization, and we shared the same duties as the rest of the office, like taking shifts at the front desk when our receptionist was on vacation — lots of responsibility! We helped set up for events, take down events, got to schedule meetings with other staff members, and got to know everyone in the office on a personal level. I cannot stress enough how much I felt like my opinions were valued at LEAP and how I was actually able to be part of the team, and that absolutely made my experience invaluable to me.

On a less sentimental note, one very tangible thing I learned about at LEAP was... meetings! My parents always talked about how “they have a big meeting today” and “so-and-so’s meetings are just so terrible,” but I had never actually been witness to a real-life, work environment meeting. That all changed at LEAP. Every day I had some type of meeting. On Mondays, we had full development office meetings where we discussed our progress on an office level. On Fridays, we had individual meetings with Rachel about our own projects. On Thursdays, I met with another Development staff member to keep her updated on my work that she would have to take over once my fellowship ended. Meetings to train development staff on Excel. Meetings to receive feedback on the annual report. Full LEAP meetings with all the building staff. Wow! I learned a lot by observing Rachel’s leadership style and the strategies she used in meetings to take everyone’s input into consideration but also stay on task. My biggest takeaway was the she always started our Monday development meetings by asking us a personal question such as, “What is something good that happened to you over the weekend?” or “What is something you noticed in programming that resonated with you?” All six development staff members had to answer the question and she never rushed our answers. I think that practice set a positive tone for the meeting and everyone felt that they were being listened to and valued.

Another take-away from my ten weeks at LEAP was that I experienced a positive, friendly, fun, and passionate working environment, and I now know that that is something that I hope to seek out and find in my career. Everyone at LEAP said hello to each other in the hallways, was incredibly respectful and kind, and truly loved the work that they were doing, and that in turn made me love the work that I was doing.

I learned about the positives and negatives of life in the nonprofit sector. The biggest positive is undoubtedly that the impact you can have on lives is immeasurable and as a result, the work is incredibly fulfilling. However, the behind the scenes reality of running a non-profit is that you must be at the hook and call of big donors, you must tailor the work you do to meet painstakingly
must be at the beck and call of big donors, you must tailor the work you do to meet painstakingly specific grant restrictions, and the state and local governments can decide to defund you whenever they please. There are also ethical challenges of deciding whether or not to accept money from less-than-ethical sources, competing with other noble non-profits for scarce funding resources, and grasping with whether or not accepting donations from corporations who further inequality enables them to continue furthing inequality. Tough stuff!

Finally, I will say that LEAP provided me with an example of what truly impactful community work looks like. Every detail of their programming is designed with the children, young adults, and communities they serve in mind. When LEAP children (ages 7-12) turn 13, they can become Leaders-in-Training, where the focus of their programming shifts to more mature topics like sex education, race relations, and high school preparation. Once they turn 16, LEAP will hire them as Junior Counselors and give them access to college preparation resources, including an out-of-state college tour for four days. The Junior Counselors work under Senior Counselors who are college students, the majority of whom went through LEAP themselves. The Senior Counselors are in charge of implementing literacy-based curriculum to their campers, who spend hours a day in an environment where reading is “cool,” and their role models are all college students who look like them. From ages 7 to 22, LEAP provides their constituencies with the resources to grow and learn and an environment that fosters their potential. In addition to the structure of the program itself, every tiny detail of LEAP’s programming is designed with the community in mind. LEAP purchases books where the heroes/heroines are boys/girls of color so that LEAP children can envision themselves following their footsteps. LEAP Senior Counselors live in housing in the children’s neighborhoods over the summer. Every LEAP kid goes camping, many of them for the first time. LEAP Counselors take their kids on adventures throughout New Haven to museums, libraries, parks, etc., via public busses, so that the kids can hopefully go back to those locations with their families. This truly community-based, nurturing approach is why LEAP has been a fixture in New Haven for 27 years. Because of my experience at LEAP, I now know the characteristics of a truly good, truly aware, truly impactful non-profit.

Once again, I want to take the opportunity to thank the Harvard Club of Southern Connecticut for giving me the chance to work at LEAP this summer. If you couldn’t tell by my three pages of rambling, I loved my experienced and learned more than I could have imagined. I will strongly encourage my fellow Southern Connecticut-hailing peers to consider this fellowship, and strongly encourage them to consider LEAP specifically. Thank you again, and please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to know more about LEAP and/or my fellowship (as you can see, I love talking about it!).

Sincerely,

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