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MPP/MBA '23
Sillerman Fellow Summer 2022

Internship with New Profit Reflection Paper

This past summer, I was a summer intern on the Catalyze Investments team at New Profit. New Profit practices venture philanthropy, a phrase that I had little understanding of. Furthermore, I was coming into this summer full of skepticism of the philanthropic world. I had worked with a number of philanthropies that practiced traditional grantmaking. In those interactions, while I was given basic instructions about how to submit a funding proposal, I was always left with a number of questions about how and why philanthropies do the work that they do. There was a lack of transparency throughout the grantmaking process, there was an obvious power imbalance between grantmaker and grantee, and I constantly felt like the direction of my projects changed depending on the needs of whatever funder was giving us money at the time.

Because of this oftentimes frustrating experience, the concept of social justice philanthropy was - and still is - especially intriguing to me. I wanted to learn more about what a transparent grantmaking process entailed. How do foundations decide which programs are prioritized, and why? What does disrupting the traditional grantmaking power balance look like in practice? I wanted to learn from some of the trailblazing foundations working to create a more equitable and just way of redistributing community resources.

The more I learned about the New Profit and the innovative way they practice philanthropy, the more intrigued I became. While I was able to work on a range of exciting projects, from creating recommendations for a more equitable grantee selection process to exploring how to build out an alumni grantee network, the most impactful experience I had was talking to my coworkers at New Profit. The people of the organization were willing to engage with heady, philosophical conversations about New Profit's role in this frequently inequitable system. They were open to discussing my questions about how decisions are made in philanthropies and joined me in questioning how to interrogate the power balance between grantmakers and grantees. In addition to reckoning with my views of philanthropy, I also had the opportunity to learn from a number of skilled facilitators, thought leaders, and practitioners. My direct manager in particular had a profound impact on how I viewed leadership; she led with a uniquely compassionate, gentle, and empathetic manner that commanded attention.

The world of philanthropy is far from perfect. But after my experience this summer, I know that there are many other people that have these same doubts as me. There are smart, curious people trying to make the philanthropic world a more equitable place despite the antiquated systems in which we live, and it gives me hope. There are people that believe that, in a perfect society, their jobs shouldn't be necessary. While I left the internship with a number of critiques still in mind, I realized that you can want to participate in something while also making it better.